

Spring 2021, Volume 1, Issue 1



The Journal of Peer Tutoring in Secondary Schools

The Journal of the Secondary School Writing Centers Association



Tutor to Tutor

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Recommended Citation

"Reviving Student Research: Strategies for Tutoring Student Research Papers." *The Journal of Peer Tutoring in Secondary Schools*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2021, <http://sswca.org/journal/1-1/>.

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Reviving Student Research: Strategies for Student Research Papers

Alexandra Wong, *Johns Hopkins University (MD)*

In the 2018–19 school year, I served as a first-year writing tutor within Hayfield Secondary School’s Hawk Writing Center (HWC) located in Alexandria, Virginia, after completing a one-month training module through Hayfield Secondary’s Advanced Composition course. That same year, the school’s administration also piloted its Advanced Placement (AP) Capstone Seminar class. As part of this course, students write research papers that contextualize a selected subject. These papers span from 1,000 to 2,200 words (College Board), and writing them is meant to teach students critical thinking skills needed for high-level discussions at the undergraduate level (College Board). The benefits students receive from writing these papers include learning how to think analytically and potentially earning AP credit from the AP Seminar exam after paper submission (College Board). Since AP Capstone Seminar students cannot receive adult guidance on drafting and revising their papers (College Board), the Hayfield AP Capstone Seminar teacher required her students to come to Hayfield’s HWC at least once to get feedback on their work from an HWC tutor.

Since the 2018–2019 school year was our first year tutoring a pilot class and the assignment is more comprehensive than the standard five-paragraph essay, our usual training did not adequately meet the needs of AP Capstone Seminar tutees. Often after tutoring AP Capstone Seminar students’ papers, I believed I did not sufficiently tutor the paper because students left discouraged and we did not cover the whole assignment. I took it personally when the students left discouraged, so I resolved to better the HWC’s practices to meet AP Capstone Seminar students’ needs.

For the 2019–20 school year, I focused on improving the writing center’s practices around the following research questions:

1. How can we improve our tutoring practices to best prepare tutors to collaborate with AP Capstone Seminar students who come in with longer research papers?
2. Will better preparing tutors to work with AP Capstone Seminar students help improve these tutees’ confidence in their writing abilities?

These questions were particularly relevant to the HWC as the AP Capstone Seminar student count at Hayfield Secondary quadrupled in the 2019–2020 school year but are also relevant for any writing center that welcomes tutees coming in with technical research papers associated with the International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum. For this project, I collaborated with Hayfield Secondary’s AP Capstone Seminar teacher, Kristen Dvorak; the HWC director, Stephanie Passino; and other HWC tutors to plan and implement initiatives for improving tutor preparation.

In fall 2019, I first focused on identifying challenges that tutors face when working with AP Capstone Seminar students. The first challenge that tutors face is that the paper’s word count makes it difficult to read and give feedback in a short twenty-five to thirty minute tutor session. As a result, tutors have trouble giving quality feedback on all parts of the paper because they could not read through the whole draft in one session. Because tutors read the paper aloud with the tutee, a tutor can typically only read and give feedback for the first four pages of a tutee’s eight-page paper in thirty minutes. We could not increase the time per session because of

room-capacity limits and a huge influx of tutees coming in near the assignment's deadline. Another challenge is that tutees come to the writing center with papers discussing unique topics that our tutors lack knowledge in. So, tutors do not always understand all the concepts that tutees use in their papers, limiting the help that the tutor can provide. For example, one tutee came in with a very technical research paper on the ethics of GMOs, but the tutor assigned to him did not have much expertise on the subject and therefore could not provide adequate assistance. Yet another challenge is the stress level of the tutees. The paper is worth 30–50% of the AP Exam grade, so it is a very high-stakes assignment. We could not always provide the reassurance the tutees wanted when they came in.

To address these issues, I conducted a literature review to brainstorm possible solutions. The two main sources I reviewed were the College Board resources for the AP Capstone Seminar course and the *Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors*. The College Board resources for the AP Capstone Seminar course emphasized that the course intends to teach students how to ask cross-disciplinary questions, how to evaluate potential sources, and how to synthesize ideas (College Board). From my session observations, out of these three aims the AP Capstone Seminar tutees had the most trouble with synthesizing their ideas and evidence into a cohesive paper, so we determined to prepare our tutors to address this problem. From there, I used the *Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors* for brainstorming strategies for our HWC to help AP Capstone Seminar students. In chapter 3 of the *Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors*, Ryan and Zimmerelli discuss the many “hats” that a tutor must wear when working with a tutee (28-31). I decided that tutors must prioritize wearing the “Counselor” hat and the “Commentator” hat when working with AP Capstone Seminar tutees because their papers are interdisciplinary and tackle complex issues. During tutoring sessions, AP Capstone Seminar tutees need a tutor who can switch from being inquisitive and helping a tutee talk through their ideas to also reassuring them that they are on the right track. As such, tutors need to be comfortable with the structure and some of the subjects of these longer research papers to step into the “Counselor” role and the “Commentator” role confidently. Therefore, we sought to build tutor confidence so that they could feel comfortable and confident switching in between these two roles, thereby also helping our tutees leave the writing center more confident as well.

After conducting the literature review and observing tutoring sessions to pinpoint issues, I implemented three main initiatives from November 2019–February 2020 to make writing tutors more confident in working with AP Capstone Seminar students. After the writing center director approved these initiatives, I introduced them to the writing tutors and, as tutor manager, implemented them through extensive training. Overall, these initiatives ultimately helped tutors get used to time constraints, learn more about the various subjects discussed in common papers, and understand the paper's style.

The first initiative was bolstering our AP Capstone Seminar tutor-training materials for the year. We had the AP Capstone Seminar teacher speak at our training sessions and give us strategies and tips for tutoring these papers. We looked at the course's rubrics and included these rubrics in each tutor's toolkit to use when an AP Capstone Seminar tutee came in. We read through many sample papers to get a feel for the structure and style of the AP Capstone Seminar papers. We also read through chapter 3 of the *Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors* and taught the tutors about the different “hats” they wear during sessions and how these “hats” are useful for AP Capstone Seminar tutoring sessions. In the sessions themselves, tutors accessed the AP Capstone Seminar rubrics to ensure that they were addressing the paper in the context of the rubric. By having the rubrics on hand and knowing general grading tips and what to look out for, tutors easily and confidently reassured tutees that their writing was off to a good start, boosting these tutees' confidence.

The next initiative was to introduce the center's first-year tutors to the formatting and style of AP Capstone Seminar papers by writing a similar paper in class. We assigned all first-year tutors to write a Writing in the Disciplines (WID) paper that is similar to the AP Capstone Seminar paper in length and style. The WID paper is a student-driven paper that provides background on a writing discipline of their choice. First-year tutors had to research through databases, interviews, and professional sources to learn more about their chosen discipline.

Some of the disciplines included food writing, podcast writing, and cinematography. Because the WID Paper is similar in style and breadth to the AP Capstone Seminar paper, these papers helped our tutors comprehend the time and effort that the AP Capstone Seminar students put into their own papers. This assignment also acclimated tutors to writing and reading scholarly papers at the level of the AP Seminar Capstone students or better. As a result, our tutors read and gave feedback on AP Capstone papers much faster because they were used to their style, citation format, and breadth.

Finally, for our third initiative we created an online matching system using Google Sheets to pair a tutee with a tutor who was knowledgeable about the tutee's capstone paper topic. This system eliminated the concern that tutors were not adequately assisting tutees with their papers because the tutors were not familiar with tutees' paper topics. Tutors qualified as well versed in a subject area if they had taken or were taking AP courses similar to the subject of the capstone paper. For the matching system, I asked what subjects (AP US History, AP Biology, etc.) tutors were well versed in and then recorded the information in a Google Sheet. When an AP Capstone Seminar tutee came in for a session, I welcomed them at the welcome desk and asked them about their topic. Using the Google Sheet, I matched the tutee up with a tutor who had basic knowledge about the tutee's topic from previous classes. For example, I matched tutees coming in with GMO-related papers with tutors with AP Biology knowledge. Since these tutors were already familiar with these topics scientifically, they gave more quality feedback and helped tutees talk through the questions and issues tutees came in with. This matching process also made the reading process much faster because tutors did not have to ask clarifying questions on terminology or key concepts.

In February 2020, I collected qualitative data via surveys to determine the initiatives' outcomes for both tutors and tutees in terms of improving their confidence and writing levels for their papers. Overall, the HWC hosted eighty-five AP Capstone Seminar paper tutor sessions in the 2019–20 school year. Tutors reported feeling much more confident, writing:

“I felt confident to read through that much material so fast” (Second-Year Tutor).

“I was [so] prepared and excited to tutor an AP Capstone student's paper that I asked for it personally” (First-Year Tutor).

“I used content I learned from writing my WID paper in directly helping tutees with their papers” (Second-Year Tutor).

Tutors became more confident and prepared to assist the tutees coming in with research papers. This increased confidence may have reassured and empowered tutees and fostered much more productive sessions, as shown in a qualitative survey of tutees from February 2020. The volunteer survey asked for feedback on tutees' writing confidence level before and after their tutoring session. Writing confidence level was measured on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being low and 5 being high.

The survey had eighteen responses. Of those respondents, 85% of students felt more confident after a tutoring session. Tutees' initial confidence level ranged from 2–4, peaking at 3 (Figure 1). After the session, their confidence level ranged from 2–5, peaking at 4 (Figure 2).

We received some great testimonials from the tutees, including: “I enjoy going to the HWC as they provide useful and informative feedback in a supportive environment that allows everyone to be comfortable talking about some of the flaws in their work, allowing them to learn” (AP Capstone Student, Sophomore).

Overall, we concluded that our initiatives improved tutors' confidence and their level of preparedness for tutoring AP Capstone Seminar tutees. Boosting the tutors' confidence and level of preparedness may have played a role in the tutees' increased confidence in their writing abilities and made them more excited and prepared to write their next research paper, benefiting both the tutees and the tutors.

Figure 1

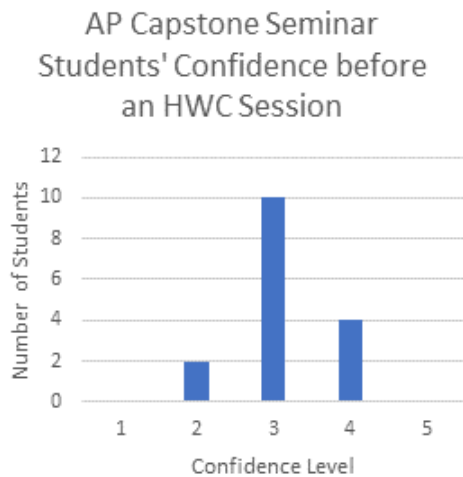
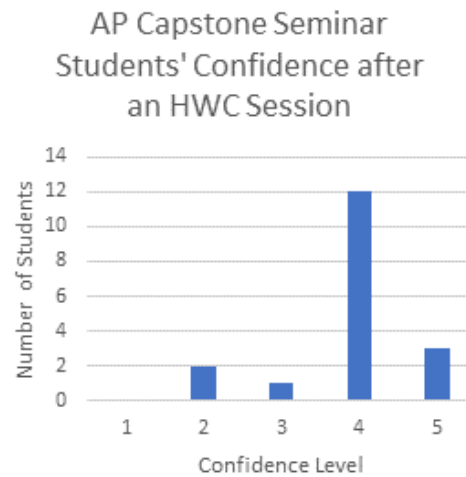


Figure 2



Implications

We have continued to use these initiatives in the HWC. To further improve these initiatives, we plan to review the AP Capstone Seminar course rubric with tutors monthly as we previously only looked at it once at the beginning of the year. An additional initiative we are piloting is to mandate that tutors read through sources and background information for common topics that AP Capstone Seminar students write about rather than just having an understanding from their AP courses.

My research only centered around AP Capstone Seminar students, but outside the AP curriculum, these findings are relevant to the IB curriculum, which features the IB extended essay of 4,000 words (IB). The initiatives we used in the HWC are also adaptable for the IB curriculum because both the IB and the AP curriculum require extensive research papers written by a student over a long period of time. So any school that has an IB curriculum can easily implement these initiatives to ensure that their writing center tutees feel much more confident with these longer papers.

When I implemented these initiatives at the HWC, we were offering in-person tutoring. In a virtual format, these initiatives may have to be amended to work efficiently. For virtual tutoring, I suggest having tutees send in their papers ahead of time so tutors have time to read them. This process would make accessing papers easier than having tutees struggle to use virtual tools to share their papers with tutors. Virtual learning has also provided an influx of new official College Board online resources, including more sample papers and YouTube videos from AP Capstone Seminar exam graders regarding strategies for researching and writing the AP Capstone Seminar papers. These resources are great tools for writing center directors to utilize when they are training tutors in what to look for when tutoring AP Capstone Seminar papers or other research papers. So, unintentionally, the initiatives we implemented in the HWC may be even more useful virtually. Teachers have more access to resources to train tutors, and time requirements for tutoring sessions can be more flexible because no desk space is required.

These initiatives are also applicable for any writing center at the high school level that has an influx of student research papers written in class. For the wider secondary school writing center community, the implications are pertinent. It is so important that our tutors are confident in helping tutees with longer papers because a tutor's confidence boosts a tutee's confidence. Confident tutors will be better prepared to tutor at the undergraduate level in which longer papers are the norm. These initiatives provide a cohesive approach for tutors to use while tutoring longer research papers, ensuring that they are confident and ready to give tutees an experience that improves their analytical writing skills and increases their confidence.

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Alexandra Wong is a first-year undergraduate student at Johns Hopkins University, where she studies neuroscience. Outside of class, she conducts auditory neuroscience research with the Hopkins School of Medicine and is a disability advocate. Her essays about disability were published nationally in *Writopia's* The Ellipsis and were recognized by the National Council of Teachers of English. From 2018–2020, she served as a Hawk Writing Center (HWC) tutor at Hayfield Secondary School (Alexandria, Virginia). During her time in the HWC, she also served as the tutor manager and presented at the 2020 National SSWCA conference about her work within the HWC.