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✻ *Poof!* ✻

⌘ POWERFULL MAGICKAL ARTS FOR RESISTANT STUDENTS ⌘

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*A Workshop for the College Avenue Writing Center*

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A fortnight from Samhain, 1999

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*"The Alchemy of Wrongs and Rights": An Old Alchemist Speaks*

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I am from the Old School of tutoring—the *really* Old School. That means I have two core beliefs about tutoring: first, students improve just by coming to the Writing Center no matter what the tutor does and second, the tutor should therefore maximize a student's time writing without the tutor. Yet behind these beliefs is a more fundamental belief: *the student has to want to improve, or nothing will change*. It's like that old joke: How many therapists does it take to change a lightbulb? One, but the lightbulb has to really want to change [insert dark evil laughter here].

I've tutored more students than I care to remember. A lot of the time, I have no idea what effect I am having, and, in fact, I seem to be having little or no effect at all. But sometimes, it happens. *Education*. It's magic really. They just get it—suddenly, spontaneously. And it's not anything I did; if it were I'd be bottling it and dispensing it with every student in my care. I've seen it happen in my teaching, too. One day they're lost, the next day they're found. It's part of what excites me most about teaching in all forms: the moment of education when things suddenly click. I've studied it as best I can, but the only thing I have come to realize about the moment is that it's not my magic, *it's theirs*.

And, realizing that the magic is theirs empowers me as well, because it helps me to realize my own role: not to do, but to *enable*. This knowledge (like all knowledge) has a power, and I've found that keeping this in mind is particularly useful when dealing with "resistant" students; for the first step in dealing with resistant students is remembering that ultimately the responsibility is theirs, not yours.

All students, I think, are resistant, but some moreso than others. Before they can do, and before you can enable, you both have to find ways to overcome that resistance, or at least set it aside. And the first step is figuring out just what they're resistant *to*.

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*"Introductory Divination": What's the Problem?*

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First, an important note to frame this entire discussion. Resistance is rare. It seems pretty common, I know, because every student who comes in has *some* resistance. Writing is work, and no one likes to work. But *truly* resistant students, the ones we'll be discussing here, are students who will not or cannot work, no matter how much pushing, prodding, or prompting you do. Before we start any of this, then, it's important for us to think about just which students we're talking about. So we need to start by thinking about what a resistant student is.

Discuss

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**What sorts of resistance have you encountered in your tutoring?  
What did they do? How did they behave? What were they resisting?**

Take notes below

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There are two types of resistant students: the ones who know they are being resistant, and the ones who don't. Some students mean to resist; they deploy their resistance as a strategy they think will get them out of a situation they don't want to be in. But other students are resistant without even knowing it. And, once they see their resistance and get rid of it, they'll be surprised at how much easier the work seems to be. But in either case, the first thing you have to do is bring the resistance into the light, so both of you can look at it. If it remains lurking behind the writing it will be a pain in the ass for the both of you.

But when helping students, the temptation is to go to the writing first: "OK, let me see your paper and then we can figure out where to go." That's great for students who are ready to work, but for truly resistant students—the ones who are stuck around the writing—going to the paper does nothing more than put them right into the exact

place of their resistance. It doesn't get you anywhere because you're not finding the problem behind the problem. Instead, you may be triggering the very resistance you need to diffuse. After all, let's face it, no matter what their problem is, you know for a fact it has a lot to do with writing or they wouldn't be sitting in front of you. So if you sense the resistance, if the hairs on the back of your neck get prickly, step back from the writing first and talk.

This is about the only time I talk to students, and I mean really *talk*. Session notes are nice—I mean they get things into writing and get *to* the writing—but they won't help with resistance. In fact, empty or sparse session notes can be one of the first signs of resistance. So the first thing to do is talk to the student about what's going on. The question is, "Hey, what's your problem?," but that's usually not a good way to phrase it. Instead, ask them about why they're here, what they want, what's giving them problems (and not in the writing, but in the class, or in their life).

This is meta-tutoring, and almost metaphysical tutoring. You need to find where they are not in terms of the assignment but up in their head. Once you know that, you can start helping them through that stuff to get to the written stuff.

For some students, fingering the resistance is enough to dispel it. For students not aware of their resistance, this is *often* enough; sometimes, when you're not aware that you're doing something you have no choice but to keep doing it. But when you see what you're doing, you realize it's not what you want to do and you stop doing it. Even for students who have chosen to resist, this is sometimes enough; subterfuge doesn't work when you see it, and they may realize quickly that that trick ain't gonna work here.

But asking them about what's going on is more often only the first step. Resistance is, well, resistant. It usually likes to stay around as long as it can, and just identifying it may do little or nothing to get rid of it. So after you find it, after you and your student see it, then it's your move. You gotta tell them the score.

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*"Powerfull Incantations": Telling Them the Score*

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Transfiguration I

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**I am a student you're meeting for the first time. I haven't passed a paper yet. I don't get it. I try and all but teacher is a crazy man. I finally came to the Writing Center because I want to get a passing grade. Help me.**

Take notes on the interaction below

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After you've talked with them about what they're resisting, you need to confront that resistance head-on. And that means more talk.

It's become something of a motto for me. When a student asks me to do *for* them what they need to do themselves I reply, "This is a pen, not a magic wand." You have to be honest with students, and the more brutally so the better. You need to dispel their illusions of what you are there to do even as you help them realize that they can do themselves what they're there to do. Being completely upfront with students can often diffuse some resistance immediately. It lets them know you're being straight with them, and more importantly it shifts the work to be done back onto them. Sometimes if they realize that, it's enough. For students who have chosen to resist, especially, it lets them know right away that this strategy is not going to work, and it sends that message even more clearly than just naming the resistance.

It's tough love tutoring. "Yes, you failed this paper. Yes, you may have to retake this class. No, that's not the worst thing in the world, and the important thing is that no one here—not me, not your teacher—is punishing you with that grade. This is not a competition. No one is beating you, or beating you up. It's all about giving you the skills you need to succeed in the rest of your college career. It may take you more time to get those skills, and I can help, but you have to decide you want them, and you have to decide you want to escape Composition bad enough to bust your ass working. Yes, it's going to be work. Yes, it's going to be a lot of work. No, it's not easy. No, it doesn't get any easier. It sucks. But you know what? So does life. When we let it, at least. So it's your decision: if you want to get past this I can help, but only help. You need to do it for yourself."

This kind of honesty is not a solution in itself but is, like the writing itself, a process. It's the mode you need as you work through specific resistances. You have to name them, confront them, and be honest about one thing above all: this resistance (whatever it is) is gonna get you nowhere except back in this same class next semester. Now, ready to work?

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*"Exorcising Bad Spirits": The Tutor as Therapist*

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Discuss

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**Have your students ever gotten emotional, and I mean really emotional? What emotions have you seen and how have you dealt with them?**

Take notes below

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I've had students cry before: out of anger, despair, frustration, and a few other things that I don't even fully know. I've had students angry, disappointed, confused, and more. We tend to forget how fraught writing can be, since the kind of people who tutor are not the kind of people who find writing fraught. But for the students who turn to the Writing Center, writing is such a difficult task that it often stirs up all kinds of emotions. Emotions are a kind of resistance. Used consciously or not, they keep students from the work they need to do.

If we think of our role only in terms of writing, then emotional outbursts seem not only anomalous but even somehow dangerous. It's not easy to get a student to focus on an argument when they can't see the page for all their tears. They don't write when they're angry, and they don't focus when they're frustrated. Emotions seem to have no place in the Writing Center, true, but there they are. So what do you do?

Well, if you're anything like me, the first thing you do is feel unbelievably uncomfortable. And for a number of reasons. Emotional displays are on some level *supposed* to invoke discomfort in the observer since they are meant to move you and that means moving you out of a role and space that you find pretty comfortable. Beyond that basic human reaction, you might feel awkward since we're not really trained to deal with situations like that. And, it seems to prompt an intimacy that we usually don't have with near-strangers. It's one thing to comfort your best friend, and quite another to comfort a student.

So, accept the fact you're going to be uncomfortable. But then use your role as tutor to deal with both their action and your reaction. The word "tutor" comes from a Latin word meaning "to look after"; the word "therapy" comes from a Greek word meaning "to nurse." They're not very far apart, and at times like this they are very close together.

Because you have to be a therapist of sorts. Therapists, after all, don't buy into the emotional display. Instead, as professionals, they help the person deal by using a professional remove. You're doing the same thing with every student you see: you help them deal, though with writing. But when they're crying, no writing—no work—is being done, right?

Wrong. The most important thing you can do when a student is being emotional is validate it, encourage it, and then step out of the way. Let the student know it's not only OK to cry, rant, or whatever, but in fact it's important. They need to get all that crap out before they can write, so just letting them do it is an important step in the tutoring process. It's like pre-pre-writing. It's not wasting time, it's the first step to moving on. Ask them what space they need and give it to them. Ask them if they want to talk about it or be left alone or go to the restroom—whatever is going to help them get it all out. *Then* get back to the writing.

And they *should* get back to the writing as soon as they are able to focus again. If all they do is vent, they'll leave feeling a bit better, but at the same time they'll be vulnerable once again as soon as they sit down to write the paper they didn't work on in your tutoring session. If they don't get back to the writing, the problem will come back, and maybe even in a worse form when they are that much closer to the paper's deadline.

One thing you may suggest, especially with angry or frustrated students, is (perhaps ironically) writing. Tell them to take out a sheet of paper and just start writing.

It might start "I am so fucking angry because . . ." or "I hate my teacher because . . ." or "I want to give up because . . ." Bringing them to paper has a few advantages. First, it lets you out of the situation at hand and then lets you back into it through the remove of the written word. Second, it lets them *really* get out what's inside and as they write they may stumble onto the issue behind the issue. Third, it lets them know that writing is a process that heals as much as they feel it destroys while you both return to the "Writing" part of the "Writing Center." Fourth, when it's down on paper, they can see it, identify it, deal with it.

*Are you a therapist?* By no means. That's not your job and you sure as hell don't get paid for that. And, an important caveat here is that you need to make sure not only that you don't play therapist, but that you think about whether or not a therapist is just what the student needs. If the trouble seems deep, you should suggest the counseling center. And, there used to be some pamphlets on just what to look for when it comes to students who need professional help (are those still around, Carol/Anthony?).

Some students may need counseling, and you should be aware of that. If it's appropriate, let them know about it. But some students just need to vent, and that's crucial too. Let the venting occur, and then let the work resume.

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*"Thwarting the Evil Eye": Dealing with Sullen Students*

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Transfiguration II

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I'm your student. I don't want to be here. I tell you I don't have anything to work on. Deal with me.

Take notes on the interaction below

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It happens *all* the time, maybe even every day. Your students walk in like dead man walking. They dread the Writing Center. They don't want to be here. They have nothing to do. Or they come in late, *real* late. Not once, but every time. It's the clearest form of resistance, and perhaps the most entrenched. These are the sullen students, and they come in three forms: the reluctant worker, (rarer) the forced signee, and (rarest of all) the truly exhausted hard worker.

For all these types, the first reaction for tutors, I think, is to be a cheerleader. Sometimes that works, but sometimes it doesn't. At those other times, I think you need to consider more extreme, and riskier, measures. The trick with any of the sullen students is first to figure out just why the sullenness is there and then to find a way to get beyond or around it and back to the writing.

Late students can be a special case, so let me deal with those first. Find out why they're late. If it's isolated, fine, we all have days like that. If it's a question of bad

scheduling then help them see that maybe it wasn't smart to choose this period when they have a class on Busch right before it. Think about having them switch to a time they can actually make. If it's just that they so dread the experience they show up late, well, read on.

The most common sullen student you'll find is the reluctant worker. If this is a student who just has trouble working, then I use all the standard tools of tutoring: cheerleading first and foremost and then small tasks they can accomplish and then build on ("*work on just this paragraph; can you clarify just this connection?; just find two quotes that you think are important to the argument of this essay*"). Usually, these students just need a push to get started and once working will do fine. When they claim they have nothing to do, and you help them see there's plenty to do, maybe even stuff that will get them ahead, then they usually give in and get to work.

Sometimes, though, cheerleading has little effect and small tasks get smaller effort. Then I start to pull out the big guns, and that means, again, telling them the score: "You want to leave? Fine. You have nothing to do? OK. But before you go just let me make some stuff clear. You're an adult. You get to make decisions. I'm not gonna make them for you. But being an adult also means living with the consequences of your decisions. You can leave if you want, but here are the consequences: you're not going to do well in this class if you don't get the help I can give; you may end up in Comp next semester and back at the Writing Center, too; if you just show up and leave I'll have to mark you absent, and you might end up with a nasty little 'F' on your transcript. Now, I get paid whether you're here or not, because there's that student over there who really wants to work. I'm not going to keep you against your will, but I do want you to know what your decision means. It's your call. What's it gonna be?" Putting it in these terms makes it pretty clear that what's on the line is not just this tutoring session but their grade, both in the class and for the Writing Center. If they still don't want to be there, then you should let them go. In the end it's their decision, and when they get dropped from the Writing Center and beg Carol/Anthony to let them back in, you can let them know the student made that decision and knew the consequences. If they end up failing, *that* might be the real lesson they need to learn. And busting your ass to save theirs is *not* going to help them. It may be that the lesson they need to learn is that in real life, when you don't do the work, no one saves you. You fail.

A less dangerous maneuver, and the one I'd try first, is compromise. Tell them to work for half the session. This of course is a trick since if they can work that much you can usually convince them to stay the whole time: "Whoa. This is good work on the

intro, but hey if you stick around and polish this argument you're gonna be in a perfect space to nail this paper. How about you go ahead and stay?"

In any case, for the reluctant worker the whole trick is to not buy into their reluctance: cheerlead it away, confront it with consequences, or trick it with compromise. Most often than not what really is behind the sullenness is a sense of being overwhelmed by the work to be done; simply starting it can make that feeling go away. Once in the groove, things go fine.

The second kind of sullen student is rarer but more troubling; this is the student who just doesn't want to be at the Writing Center **at all**. Some teachers actually *force* the students to sign up. I've never agreed with this. The basic truth is that if the student doesn't want to be there, then it's doing no good. Forcing the student to sign up and attend tutoring turns the Writing Center into the Detention Center. And you become the guard, holding them against their will.

If you find an especially sullen student, you might want to ask why they came to the Writing Center. If they were forced to come, then there's not much you can do. You have to go back to telling them the score: "OK. You don't think you need this, but your teacher does. Maybe teacher is crazy, but you still have to be here. I can't change that. Life is gonna be filled with things you're forced to do. Deal with it. *But*, since you have to be here for 80 minutes once a week, you might as well get this writing crap out the way. It's that much less you have to do at home. I can't make this go away, but maybe I can make it worthwhile. How does that sound?" Point out that (presumably) they're not passing, so what could it hurt to give tutoring a fair chance?

That *should* work with the sullen student forced to attend. It might not. At that point, it's your call. You can let them sit there for 80 minutes doing nothing or whatever. You can't make them work in the end, and trying to force them is just going to take time and energy away from that other student who actually *wants* your help. Keep in mind, the Writing Center is P/F *based on attendance*. They *are* coming, but if they refuse to work, you can't do anything about it. If it's really that bad, I would even think about discussing it with Carol or Anthony. If a student is just there because of the teacher, then they are wasting valuable space. In some situations, it's going to be better to let the student withdraw, and if you think that's the case, turn to the powers that be and discuss it. But let me be clear, of the hundreds of students I've tutored, I've had this situation maybe once. Don't expect it to happen, but know that it can.

Rarest of all is the truly exhausted hard worker. In extremely specific circumstances, when I have a student who wants to leave, *I let them*. You have to be *very very* careful in making this call, since giving in to a student's desire to leave sets a very dangerous precedent. But sometimes it makes sense. This I learned the hard way after having a student actually fall asleep in a session. He was, literally, exhausted from living the overburdened life of a RU student, and what he really needed was sleep. So I let him go. We need to think about helping students in the broadest sense possible. It's not just a question of "*what do they need to do in this paper?*," but also a question of "*what do they need to do so that can do what they need to do in this paper?*" Leaving the Writing Center and taking a nap could mean they have the energy to do work on the paper later. But this is only true for those students who you know usually come in and work, but this time come in and look dead to the world, or cough up chunks of lung, or shake from all-nighter-espresso buzzes.

Let me reiterate: this is a dangerous move, if sometimes a good one. It's something to do *only when all else has failed* or only when you know this particular student just can't do it that session. It's not so much giving in to their sullenness as it is recognizing and trusting that they know what they're doing, not only in this specific instance but also more generally from the work you've done with them so far.

I've done it just a few times in my eight years of tutoring. And even then, I chat with them first about what they need to do for the work they have due and what they're going to have ready for me for the next session. They have to demonstrate that they know what needs to be done even if they don't have the energy to do it, and they have to be able to understand what needs to be done for the next session as well.

When students give you the evil eye, don't back down. Get their eyes on their work instead. But if that doesn't work, realize something much much bigger might be going on, and deal with that as best you can.

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*"Breaking Enchantments of Thralldome": Defining Work Relations*

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Transfiguration III

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I'm your student. I give you my paper and say "Fix this." Deal with me.

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Take notes on the interaction below

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Sometimes students resist doing work by not seeing it as their work, but as yours. These are the students who come in expecting you to fix or edit their papers. Mostly these pleasant illusions are shattered in the course of signing up for tutoring, and yet some will still come into your session expecting you to be their editor, not their tutor.

It's crucial that you explain what your role is, what you're there to do, and what you won't do. Guess what I do . . . Right! Tell them the score: "I am here to work with you, not for you." If you have a taste for dripping sarcasm, you can even try: "Sure, let me fix this right up. Of course, I won't be able to do that when you take your final exam, so you'll fail that. Oh, and of course, if you fail the final you fail the class. But, hey, no big deal! You can come back next semester and I'll edit some more!" The point behind such sarcasm is a good one to communicate, though perhaps in a more normal way: they need to understand that the less you do and the more they do the better it is for them. They need to know the Writing Center is about attaining the skills they need and that the goal of tutoring is for the student to have no need for your skills by the end of the

semester. In the end, you won't be taking their final exam with them, you won't be writing every paper with them, and you certainly won't be there in their future lives when they'll need the critical thinking skills they never stopped to learn in Comp. You can help them *learn*, but you can't *just* help them.

This seems like an easy resistance to overcome, but beware!, it has an insidious variation. This is the plea for help. "I don't know how to do this, can't you show me?" "My teacher says my argument needs to be clearer. I'm so lost. Can't you just give me an example of a good argument?" There's a temptation here. What harm can there be in modelling what needs to be done? The student is so distressed and so thankful when you show them and gosh it makes you feel all warm inside as well as smart and powerful and wanted and needed and even a bit sexy. Resist this enchantment! There's a difference between showing them what needs to be done or how to do it and simply doing it for them.

One way to get out of this is to discuss the form or shape of something rather than any specific content, and then pointing to how they can insert the content they need. For example, don't give them an argument, but say "Well, a good argument brings the two essays together, connecting them and drawing a meaning from the connection. Hmm, your argument is only expressed in terms of one essay. Maybe you could reword it in terms of both?"

A second way is to point them back into what they have and ask them to look at it in a different way. For example, "Well, this connection here seems good. See how you bring both authors together? Maybe you should do that over here, too." This strategy is often effective if you use teacher's comments as well: "Hrm. In your last paper, your teacher said this connection was good but that the others weren't well thought out. Why don't you just write a whole paragraph about this connection here. Maybe that will help you figure out what you need to say."

Finally, in terms of error, help them find their pattern. Sometimes student error doesn't seem to have any pattern at all, and that can feel as overwhelming to you as it does to them. But most often, you can locate at least one error that keeps cropping up. Circle it once or twice and then have *them* locate it in the rest of the paper. Need some practice? Try the apostrophe. No one knows how to use it anymore, so it's a safe bet whatever student you're working with could use help there.

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*"Protection from Dark Invocations": A Dangerous Triangle Revisited*

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Discuss

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Have your students ever pitted you against their teacher? Or pitted their teacher against you? Do your students feel like their teacher has it out for them? Do they express frustration with the teacher's comments?

Take notes below

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When I first started tutoring, we were warned about the "dangerous triangle": the tricky relationship between tutor, student, and teacher. Students, we were told, will try and play the tutor and teacher off each other. They'll fail a paper and tell their teacher "But my tutor said it was an A." They'll bring in a paper with comments and say "These comments are wrong, don't you think?" Invoking the teacher or the tutor is a dark incantation and a definite resistance: it's meant to do one thing above all—avoid the work while placing the blame anywhere but on the student. Since it has two forms, let's look at each.

"Teacher is a crazy person who has it out for me." OK, sometimes teachers really do make some serious mistakes, but generally speaking, they know what they're doing. Certainly, there's a powerful coven watching their grading (*Spellmeyer?* You think that's a *coincidence?* Yeah, right!). And trust me, in those extremely rare instances where

something really is going on with the teacher, the Writing Program knows it (and I often end up tutoring that student in lieu of their class). But telling your students that their teacher's comments are right may not help. It just makes *you* the enemy too, and therefore also makes the resistance that much more entrenched. Try some validation therapy instead: "OK, so your teacher has it out for you. But you know what? If you keep resisting, your teacher wins. The only way to beat your teacher is to get out of this class. So why don't we look at the comments and figure out what your teacher wants, then figure out how to do that? Maybe it's crazy, maybe it's wrong. It doesn't matter. Teachers give grades, so you always give them what they want."

In validating their illusions of persecution, you ally yourself with them—*you're on their side*—and suddenly they can do the work. BUT, you do that not by saying the teacher is wrong (or right); instead, you simply point out that you can help them do what the teacher wants. *We* know it's also what's right, but we don't have to let them know we know. NOR do you want to suggest that the student is right in thinking the teacher is wrong. The trick is to bracket entirely the question of whether the teacher is right or wrong. It just doesn't matter. The only thing that matters is responding to those comments, and that's what you need to communicate.

Students will also set you up to invoke *you* against their teacher; this is the second form and it's just as dangerous. You want to do the same move to diffuse this resistance. When students ask you if you think it's a passing paper, bring it back to the real grader: "Well, you know it doesn't matter what I think. I can't give you a grade. Let's look back at your teacher's comments from the last paper, and then maybe you can figure out for yourself if you're doing what needs to be done in this paper."

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*"The Magick of Explanation": The Why Behind the What*

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Discuss

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Have you ever asked a student to do a task and returned to find they haven't done it? Have your students ever complained that you don't seem to be helping them?

Take notes below

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There is another kind of resistance, one which is neither conscious nor unconscious on the part of students, but results instead from a simple lack of understanding. Oftentimes, students can't see the connection between what you're asking them to do and what they need to get done. Your suggestions may fall on unintentionally deaf ears only because they don't see how it relates to the project they have before them.

This is a common resistance but fortunately one easily dispelled. As you work with your student, be sure to always indicate *why* you're asking them to do a particular task. For example, if a student is having trouble with an essay, don't just suggest they find a passage that really confused them. They might think that sounds like busy work. Instead, explain first that sometimes the parts that confuse us the most in an essay are the parts where a lot of important stuff are happening. If we can figure those out, we usually get a better handle on the essay. So, why don't you find one of those places?

The pattern will be the same with just about every task you ask a student to do. It will often sound like busy work to them unless you explain why you need them to do it. This is a useful strategy for you as a tutor as well. It not only helps the students get the work done and see the larger project, but it also helps you bring into focus the goals you see in writing and the ways in which you conceive of the writing process.

After all, if *you* don't know why a student should do this or that task, how can you expect *them* to understand it?

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"*Hocus Pocus Focus*": From Here to Beyond

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These are some of the resistances I've encountered—some quite common, some exceedingly rare. There are many others, of course, but I hope these few give you some sense of how I generally approach resistant students.

Since these are only my experiences, it's also important for you to think about drawing from the experiences of other people as well. Most importantly, if you have a student you think has a real problem, don't hesitate to go to Carol or Anthony to discuss it. They're not just there because they get paid; they're also there because of their commitment, experience, and knowledge. Use all that when you can or need to.

Generally, the first step is to talk to them and find out what's going on. Then I tell them the score by giving them the plain, brutal honest facts (I seem to do this a lot, don't I?). There are times when we'll have to talk things out, times when I know they will need their space, but in the end, it's always time to get back to the writing. After all, another one of my mottos is "It's called the *Writing Center* because when you come here you *write*." Resistance gets in the way of that, but dealing with the resistance should never displace that. Do what you have to do, get *them* to do what they have to do, but in the end make sure the focus is where it really needs to be: on their writing.

Because the magic of education doesn't happen in conversation. It happens in their papers. You can discuss all you want, chat all you want, exchange ideas all you want, but the paper is where it happens. So dispel the resistance, get back to your work as tutor, and watch the magic unfold.

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*"Additional Spells":* Takes Notes Here

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