

A Pile of Broken Pencils

by Sarah Callahan, English Tutor

"Learn to put down you pencil" is one of the many tidbits of wisdom that I have picked up on the quest to become a successful tutor. Unfortunately, there were times in my experience of tutoring where I not only wanted to put down the pencil, I wanted to break it over someone's head.

As I think about myself, I realize that I've changed a lot from that shy girl who tiptoed into L-47 on my first day of tutoring. I've not only learned more about the English language, I've learned a lot more about myself. I found that I have a less patience than I originally credited myself with. I realize that I know a lot less than I thought I did, and that I can't express myself as well as I first thought I could. I fall short in many ways, but tutoring has taught me to deal with feelings of frustration and inadequacy with myself and with others.

I remember one of the first questions I had about tutoring when I first began: "What happens if my tutee asks me a question that I can't answer?" Even as I wrote it, I cringed at the thought. "How embarrassing! How utterly humiliating!"

Unfortunately, as time passed, I came across this ultimate dreadful thing, not just once, but many times. There were so many times where something just didn't seem right, but I could not possibly explain why. Appositives, gerunds, infinitives, iambic pentameter, blank verse, semi colons, antecedants...the words swirled up before me from the questioning eyes of a tutee, and their answers seemed to be stuck forever somewhere in my head that was impossible to reach.

Sitting there with a blank stare was not acceptable, but the answer to my question was quite simple, really. When I didn't know an answer, I got up and went to the desk and asked for help. This was a wonderful thing to do, not only because the people behind the desk are there because they also love the subject that you are tutoring and have probably even majored in it, but because behind the desk, there is an entire library of books with every answer I could possibly want stuck between their pages. I found that admitting that I didn't know an answer wasn't something to hide or be ashamed of.

I've learned that being a good teacher doesn't mean that you automatically have all the right answers, but it does mean that you are willing to look for the right answers when you don't have them. When I got up and returned with a book to answer a question, it not only modeled the good habit of seeking out knowledge to my tutees, it made my answer more valid. "How do you know that?" My answer wasn't, "I just do", but, "Because it's what the book says."

A book can teach me perfect grammar, but no one book could teach me to be a perfect tutor. It is something that I will slowly improve at over months of experience. In the meantime, I break pencils, through them across the room, and fill them with teeth marks. And oh yeah. If a new scrap of understanding just happens to float by, I just might pick up that pencil and jot it down.