For your prosperity, prospectively

Dear prospective tutor,

I already love you for wanting to be a tutor. Being an English tutor for De Anza students can be an overlooked and underestimated job—congratulations on your gain of such a prestigious position! However, heed my warning: this job fits its job description (I know, surprise). I first came into this class, naïve and ready, to pounce on every problem presented by every tutee. After meeting my first tutee, I realized that I still had many things that I did not know. I suppose that I did know, but I did not know how to explain them. Meaning, I did know that the sentence did not sound correct, but I did not know why. This feeling of not-knowing sickened me. As a tutor, I was afraid that I would lose credibility against not only my tutees, but also my peers and my supervisors. Compared to all the other senior tutors, I felt as if I was a freshman in high school, all over again. Oh, the dread.

Luckily, De Anza has wonderful resources and wonderful people. My tutees could not detect my not-knowing-something; or at least, they did not mention it or show it. They were patient, as I was patient with them. I learned how to utilize my resources, surrounding me in unexplored territory (WRC). Who knew that a grammar book could be so useful? Who knew that the internet was a magical abyss? I did not know, and it did not occur to me before to use them. I did not even care to think that people could be resources—the people at the Writing and Reading Center are, at first, intimidating. They are brilliant creatures (upon initial observation), with much expertise. However, as I carefully observed sessions from afar (and also through one assignment required for EWRT 97), I was shown true colors of the predator chameleon. The intimidation lessened as I reviewed their techniques of imperfection on both parties. Through observation, I realized that people were still imperfect, and that tutees had problems that tutors could not always help with, and vice versa.

Upon observing other tutors tutor students, I picked up little quirks here and there. I became a hawk at catching slouches in my body posture, slang in my language, pierces in my eye contact, and significance in my presence—even my posture became fixated. I could not look unprofessional as much as I could speak unprofessionally; this was the key to my exponential growth in credibility. When I did not know how to explain something, it was easy to say, “You know what, let’s try and find this in a book/handout/internet.” My relationship with my tutees became tight bonds of trust, as I trusted them to be eager and ready to learn at the beginning of every session, and they trusted me to be just as ready to tutor. Strange as it may sound, work was not considered as work for me. It was considered a time that I could unwind and be relieved of my stress from my torturous hard-science courses. It was just an added benefit that I was paid for this relief-period, too.
Due to the love that grew in me to tutor, and the love that I saw grow in my tutees to be tutored, my job became nothing more than absolute, true learning sessions. I learned how to culturally adapt and accept the barriers that my tutees had—not all my tutees were native-born. In fact, none of them were. I had tutees that were Japanese, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Eastern European. They are not Americans. The best part is, they take free time out of their schedules to come see me every week, to learn how to start assimilating as Americans. These cultural barriers in each one of my tutees were presented through their ideas, the way that they spoke and thought, the way that they interacted with me, and the way that they organized their ideas onto paper. This was the key obstacle: understanding them.

My tutees, fortunately, were very responsive and competent, willing to work with me and learn from me. I wanted to learn just as much from them. None of my tutees were ever once rude, and if they were in a bad mood, I could not smell the stink. I learned how to ask them questions about their ideas, as much as they learned how to adequately answer them. These relationships started out as struggles, because they were afraid that I would not understand them. However, as I was intent on understanding them, my sympathetic attitude towards cultural differences shone through. It also helped that I am Vietnamese, myself. My culture is different from American culture, and I suppose that it helped lessen the tension between me and my Asian tutees. Yet, the relationship between my Eastern European tutee and I, was also significantly strong. She and I could communicate effectively, with her being responsive to all of my questions, and I struggled to piece together her thoughts as a writer through practice.

Being a weekly individual tutor has offered me insight on exactly what the job title is: I see these students once a week. You are a: **weekly, individual, tutor.** Unbeknownst to us, the quarter flashed by while we were busy learning from one another. I feel as if one assignment just led to a great grade, while a new assignment appeared for the potential of a greater grade. This is how each session was; we sat down side-by-side, and thought together. I felt valuable to someone, and let me tell you: that feeling is valuable in itself. I learned how to adapt to different types of learning, different people with different backgrounds and ideas, and different everything. Every tutee was different. They might have had some overlapping assignments together, but in terms of personality, of course everyone was different.

In the actual EWRT 97 class, I met amazing people. My peers had experienced problems that I had not experienced (luckily), and hearing about them raised my concern. What would I do if I were in their shoes? I had to think about it, and as I passed by my classmates in the WRC regularly, overhearing their problems here and there, I could not help but to think about what I would do if I were them. Some problems were discussed in online forums on Catalyst, which, as you will find out, is a requirement to this class. In class, we were surely able to get glimpses of one another’s personality, but through the online forums, there was something mystical that drew everyone’s attention—all personalities would be let loose. I was able to read my peers’ thoughts and comments, and become familiar with their diverse writing styles. Their problems, as I mentioned, were different from mine. In many cases, they were one-of-a-kind. Therefore, through the time we all spent on the online forums, we were able to interact with one another in an
unexpected, personal manner. Yet, they were all even better in person (and Facebook). You can hear them laugh in person.

The things that I learned from class were also applied. Having to read parts of the Bedford Guide, I quickly caught on that these things were vital to tutoring. The one thing that I primarily took from the Guide was that I had several caps to wear, while tutoring. This key concept was crucial in my role-playing while I was tutoring. I would need to act like various different types of people, such as the listener or teacher. I would need to be able to be flexible in my sessions, understanding that versatility was the key to strengthening my relationship between us. These students needed to fully trust that I could handle everything that they said, and I surely did adapt to listening to them. Their questions were satisfactorily answered, even if we could not find immediate answers. Their personal experiences were shared with trust, even though we were complete strangers. Their mistakes and ‘bad’ grades on their papers were just taken as ‘room for improvement’. I learned how to be fully engaged with all types of conversations with each individual, as they were all different.

As I was growing as a tutor in the middle of the quarter, I understood that I needed to undergo some minor adjustments. I was quite impatient to begin with. However, through visually seeing my tutees struggle to think and stress to communicate, I definitely planted a stem of empathy over my head. Oddly, but wonderfully, I grew patient. I grew patient with my tutees as I watched them strain themselves to understand what I was saying about their sentences. I learned how to retain my thoughts, and watch them try to fill-in-my-blanks. I watched them learn, which is something that you should try doing sometime. It’s a beautiful sight. In sentence-level-tutoring, I was able to tackle what I had long-forgotten: the names of rules. The explanations that were expected from me, after being asked, “Why does this need to be past tense? What is that called? Why do we use it like that?” and so forth were naturally required. My knowledge-base needed expansion. I wanted to say (as you will want to say, too), "English is just weird." Tutees would ask me if I could explain something that their teacher had not clearly defined, and I have to admit: most of the time, I could not explain. However, that did not discourage me. This was a pristine opportunity to seize—we would migrate to a computer station, or I would leap to the bookshelf. These answers were there for us to seek. What a great time to embark on an adventure with one another! These efforts pushed forth by the both of us would only strengthen our passions to learn and to tutor/be tutored. They would see that I was serious about them understanding these concepts, and I would see that they would be willing to understand them entirely. Sentence-level tutoring was the most difficult for me, because I could not remember many this-and-thats. In the end, I still do not remember much of what I was taught in elementary school, but that does not discourage me from finding out. My resources will help guide me and my future tutees out, as much as they have guided my previous tutees.

I hit the ground running when it came shaping, planning, and completing tutoring sessions. I made it my primary goal to touch on every question that my tutees had, while adapting to the 50-minute time-slot that we had once a week. This was accomplished through simply asking them what they wanted to do, before the session began. I made it clear to them that I wanted to work on everything that they had questions on, and if we
ever needed more time, then they were always welcome to email me. I let every tutee know that they could email me, and even though I was supposed to heed advice on not doing such outrageous things, I daringly did anyway. None of my tutees ever emailed me except for one, and it was only one paper. Out of seven tutees, and encouraging them to email me, only one did, and only once. I find this as a means of a success. My agendas were collaborative; I always started out my sessions by asking them what their new assignment was, and what they received back from their teachers. This was the initiation of problems and questions, and also raised concerns on teachers’ feedback. We went through together their teacher’s comments and markings on their papers, and by doing this, I was able to sense what their teacher wanted. Teachers are bias—especially English teachers. Don’t tell me that they are not. You can’t really have a bias Calculus teacher, but you can definitely always count on English teachers being bias. Therefore, understanding what specific teachers wanted was vital to not only my tutee, but also me. This way, I would be able to tutor based on the criteria that the teacher had in mind.

We always had a strong sense of an outside frame to work on top of, so this was only beneficial to our sessions. After we went over previous papers and whatnot, we would move onto newer assignments. I would have to ask them questions about the assignments, always reading the actual assignment paper, but also inquiring my tutees about what their thoughts were. I needed to know what they wanted to communicate in the first place. In order to assignments, usually we start with thinking about them. Brainstorming ideas verbally helped me understand who my tutees were as individuals, and how they thought differently. They would be grateful for me caring about their ideas, because this would be reflected upon their writing. Writing never happened with me—because writing should be definitely avoided in tutoring sessions, I think. Writing is reserved for at home, in the confinements of one’s writing den or library, whatever it may be. In my sessions, we focused on ideas and problems, along with questions that they would have on how to phrase things. These answers would help guide them on their next draft. Usually, they would also already come prepared with a draft for us to look at. Actually, now that I think about it, every tutee always came prepared with a first draft for us to look at together. My tutees were very serious about their writing classes, and that helped us move along smoothly together.

Scared? Prepare yourself for the worst—and also, the best. Although I have no horror stories to tell you about tutoring, I can assure you that my peers will have many. Maybe you will strike gold and have a group of tutees as great as mine. Perhaps you will find bad eggs instead, who will call you names, are rude to you, and even drop you as a tutor and tell you that you are not good enough. Prepare yourself for everything, even being hit on by your tutees—at all, they will come to you for support and for personal insight on their personal lives: intimate stuff. Above all, prepare yourself for surprises, because all sorts of surprises will arise from being a tutor. I am proud to say that I have enjoyed my tutoring sessions, each and every one of them. I enjoy my tutees, and their efforts to learn. I am happy to have been a microscopic, passing part of their lives, even for this short, three-month-period. Just remember to not take anything personal; negatively or positively. One of my major no-no’s was when I began to care too much about my tutees, which only set myself up for disappointment. In the end, understand that your tutees are just people who need help with English. Nakedly, they are fellow students who seek help
on English improvement. Do not get angry at them, do not hold grudges against them, and do not hate them. They are probably just like you, in some cases. Hold no expectations except for the bare minimal, because (surprise!) these people will have lives, apart from seeing you for a one-hour-fling every week. I cannot tell you to expect anything, but prepare for everything. Just expect the unexpected, and you will set yourself, and your tutees, up for success. Apart from all of that, be sure to submit your timecard on time for approval. Remember, money is just a side-benefit.