

## **TIPS FOR WRITING COACHES**

After graciously agreeing to volunteer as writing coaches many of you have asked the question “Now what do I do?” Listen and be creative. What every student wants is an honest critique of his or her work and suggestions on how to improve. The following are some commonly asked questions and tips gathered from students, coaches and faculty members which should help to unleash your creative juices and make you a dynamite writing coach!

### **What is the best way to get to know my student?**

When your student calls you to set up a first meeting use the opportunity to interview him or her over the phone. Ask what areas the student needs help in and why. What would the student like to achieve as a result of the coaching sessions? What is your student's short and long-term goals regarding journalism? At the first meeting make sure to exchange phone numbers and set up a procedure for canceling meetings (e.g. where to leave messages for each other).

### **What do I do during our coaching hour?**

Ask your student to bring (or e-mail/fax ahead of time) his or her journalism class assignments. Spend the hour going over the student's work; assessing the weak areas and asking where he or she encountered obstacles. Avoid becoming the student's private copy editor. Avoid simply editing and rewriting stories so that the student can turn in a polished assignment. This only results in short-term gratification. Instead, spend your time on helping your student learn the big picture – clean writing, organization, news judgment, etc. In this way, you can really be assured that your help will result in the development of long-term skills. Don't expect instant results. Don't get discouraged!

### **Where do I meet with my student?**

A place that's convenient for both of you. Students are aware that they should be doing all the traveling if necessary. Some coaches meet their students in the news office, such as in a break room or cafeteria. Others prefer to meet their students in a quiet coffee shop near the coach's workplace or home. You can, but are not required to, meet the student on campus. Just remember that the meeting place should be comfortable for you and the student. Once both of you have decided on a place, we recommend that you make it a regular meeting spot.

### **Can I give my student extra work/assignments?**

Yes. However, you should tailor your requests to your student. Be conscious of your student's class load, the hours he or she works and other time considerations. Some ideas for assignments: Ask the student to rewrite a journalism class assignment that was poorly done; ask the student to bring in newspaper stories that the student liked and didn't like and be prepared to tell you why.

### **What can I do to prepare for the coaching sessions?**

If you give your student an assignment you might ask him or her to send it to you ahead of time via fax or e-mail. This will give you time to look it over and to prepare a thorough critique. In your daily newspaper reading, look for stories that are examples of good or awful story organization and go over these with your student.

### **What other things should I consider doing?**

Students enjoy touring their writing coach's workplace. Some writing coaches have arranged for their students to sit in on news meetings, editorial boards and press conferences. Seeing the results of those meetings in the next day's newspapers gives the students a sense of the newsgathering process.

### **What is my relationship to my student's instructor?**

Some coaches have raised concerns that they might be contradicting the instructor. This is not a perceived problem. In fact, we strongly encourage coaches to directly call faculty members. All instructors strongly support the writing coach program and welcome your calls.

### **What if my student isn't improving, seems less than enthusiastic or has doubts about pursuing a career in journalism?**

Be honest. If the student isn't improving as you expected, say so. Ask the student what's wrong and ask yourself the same question. Some students are still testing the water and are not sure if they want to become journalists. A few are interested in pursuing public relations or advertising careers. The Center is committed to helping all students enrolled in journalism writing courses. By sharing your experiences you might be the one who influences them to become a journalist. You are always welcome to call the Coach Coordinator or the student's instructor to discuss these issues further.

### **How will I know if I am actually helping the student?**

After ten years of experience with the writing coach program, the Center is thoroughly convinced that writing coaches make a big difference. Faculty members see a discernible improvement in the work of their students who work with coaches. Some students reported that their class work improved by one to two grades once they started working with a coach.

### **How do I end my coaching relationship?**

You should plan to schedule your last meeting the week before finals week (usually mid-May or mid-December). Summarize your student's performance for the semester and give them job/internship advice.

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