

TUTOR TUNE UP

TWENTY CHARACTERISTICS OF A GOOD TUTOR

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- 1. What are the characteristics of a good tutor?** Good speech is important, for if the child is to learn sounds, they must be clearly enunciated. Then there is the matter of personality ...A, apple, /a/ is boring, but if you can do it with someone who is fun to be with, you can look forward to the lesson. Obviously, a high degree of dedication is important. Anna Gillingham once said to a tutor, “Well, I see our student is going to start Latin. How are you going to help him?” The tutor, Jane McClelland, replied, “I can’t. I never studied Latin.” “Well,” said Miss Gillingham, “you’d better start learning it now.” And McClelland did.
- 2. Practice sufficiently.** Tutors need to be drilled on sounds and they need to drill one another. Mock tutoring sessions, with tutors working in pairs, are invaluable. Tutors need to practice holding and flipping cards. They need to practice presenting a new sound and choosing appropriate words for reading and dictation. One of the most common mistakes new tutors make is to select words that are inappropriate, in that they involve a word or a concept that has not been covered. For instance, I watched a tutor, who had just introduced open and closed syllables; dictate the word ‘music’. She was surprised when the child wrote ‘musick’, but she shouldn’t have been.
- 3. Listen to and learn from stories.** Those of us who have been working with children and tutors for years have accumulated a wealth of little incidents that we can use to make our points memorable. Probably twenty-five years ago, I heard Katrina de Hirsch lecture. I have forgotten the substance of her lecture, but I remember, as if it were yesterday, the stories she told to illustrate her points. One was about a little kindergartner who could not learn to put on a coat. They taught her the movements blindfolded, and thereafter, she could always do it. The point was to illustrate the importance of kinesthetic writing practice with eyes averted or closed.

I’ll tell you a story that you’ll never forget. Once I was working with a fifteen-year-old boy. I explained the silent ‘e’ rule to him. I gave him a page of words to put together. When he brought the page for me to check, about half were wrong. “You go back and redo this page immediately.” The result was not better. Annoyed by his obvious refusal to think instead of guessing, I pointed to the first suffix and demanded imperiously. “Well, is this letter a vowel or a consonant?” He said, “That’s my problem. I’m never sure.” Never again have I made that particular assumption.
- 4. And while I’m on the subject of the kinesthetic, my next point is the importance of motor memory and of using it constantly.** This means the mouth and the hand. The student should be making the speech sounds accurately in

isolation and echoing the letter, word, phrase, or sentence before writing it, and then using simultaneous oral spelling if possible. (A few students cannot write and name a letter simultaneously.) The tutor should say, "I say it. You say it. Then you write it." Correct letter formation, kinesthetic writing and the use of white boards, shower walling, sand trays, and with small groups, shaving cream, is important. Get the formations right early on. A mistake once established is tough to eradicate. Proponents of invented spelling, beware!

If tutoring is being effective, half of the period must be spent with the student writing. Parents sometimes ask me, "How do I know whether this expensive tutor who is working with my child is any good?" I ask, "Is your son or daughter doing any writing?" If the answer is, "No, she says he has such a problem with reading that she isn't even going to touch spelling!" I tell the parent to look for another tutor. Letters have to be practiced daily. Writing a lower case alphabet takes only a few moments. This is not a copying excise. Too often I see letters not only over the board but taped to students' desks.

- 5. The sound of silence.** Tutors often talk too much. They have verbal skills, and as a group, they are accustomed to engaging a whole class. Our dyslexic students need to have time to process. Talking at the wrong time clutters up the airwaves and interferes with the child's processing. For example, "/mmmm/ good, /a/ excellent, /t/ very nice. Now put it all together." Is too much tutor talk.

Use body language and signals as much as you can. Remember, many dyslexics are superior in their ability to read body language. Instead of repeatedly telling him to sit up, or to correct his faulty pencil grip, develop a signal such as touching him on the arm.

Learn to wait for a response. The average classroom teacher waits about three seconds after posing a question. When a child misspells a word, you do not need to say it is wrong: merely wait until he is likely to find his own error. If you are keeping his place in oral reading, keep the pencil on the same word and give him a chance to go back and correct his error. Tutors must learn to be comfortable with silence.

- 6. Tutors need to sit opposite their pupils.** Side by side is terrible. You cannot see what the child is doing nor can you keep his place when he is reading aloud and you risk developing a permanent crooked neck. Catty-corner is acceptable, provided you have your right-handed students on your right and your left-handed students on your left. But opposite is by far the best. But what if you cannot read upside down? Well, as Anna the Great would have said, "You had better start learning now."
- 7. Learning must be drilled and practiced to the level of automaticity.** Tutors are easily fooled into equating one-time recitation with mastery. Often when we talk to tutors in January after doing some testing, they will say, "But I had him

write the alphabet every day in October. Then I stopped because he knew it so well.” Mastery does not occur until the end of many repetitions, and thereafter, spaced repetitions. Helen Durbrow used to confront and infuriate tutors with the remark, “What the student doesn’t know, the tutor hasn’t taught.” Teaching means teaching to a level of mastery.

- 8. Make a notebook.** When we work with students, we have them put all the important information into a binder or notebook for reference. Tutors should bring two notebooks to our sessions: one in which to write general notes; and another, what some tutors call the “good” language as we present it to our students. It is useful for this notebook to contain all necessary references to whatever source of workbooks the tutor likes to use, so they do not have to spend time later fumbling around looking for the appropriate list.
- 9. Tutor should make at least a thousand cards in the course of the training.** For teaching purposes, cards are much more effective than lists, and there is never a single set that will meet all their needs. Apart from Language Keys Drill Deck 1, tutors need to have cards made of the six kinds of syllables. Cards in two colors to illustrate all the vowel pairs, sight word cards. Cards with Latin prefixes and roots (Language Keys Drill Deck 2). Prefix or root on one side, and on the other a word that will trigger the meaning, followed by the meaning. The multisensory experience of making the cards will also reinforce whatever you yourself are trying to learn. I tell all tutors, sit down at home with your favorite tape, a box of chocolates, or a six-pack of beer, whatever works for you, and make cards until your fingers can no longer write.
- 10. Pay attention to handwriting.** If students are to read what a tutor writes, on assignment pads, on cards, and in case of groups, on the board, tutors must write properly. My own handwriting has been illegible for years, but when I write for students I know I have to slow down. Often tutors print incorrectly. Many of them have not practiced cursive writing since they got out of elementary school. They should be able to print correctly and to produce cursive models for both left and right-handed students. Equally important, they should be aware of the paper position, posture, and grip.
- 11. New tutors have to spend time in planning and need help in learning to set up individual lesson plans that review the old and introduce and drill the new.** Selecting words appropriate for reading and writing practice for a student appropriate to his level is particularly critical, and tutors need to practice doing this.

A plan that works for us is: Practice the alphabet, lower case and later, capitals. Spend a moment practicing letters that need work. Then use the formula IRS to practice sounds, syllables and words in isolation and then for reading and for spelling – sometimes going through several cycles in a single lesson. Introduce some new concept, however small, daily. The last ten or fifteen minutes are spent

in oral reading which gives the student an opportunity to apply the skills which have been learned.

Pacing is critical. Anna Gillingham used to say, "Go as fast as you can, and as slowly as you must." In my experience, new tutors find this aspect particularly difficult.

- 12. Avoid going overboard with the positive reinforcement.** Make a little praise go a long way. Rather than say excellent, marvelous, wonderful, and super, use body language and say uha, aha, wow, and smile. For a sixth grader to be reading a fourth grade word is good for him, but hardly constitutes excellence. And do not use stickers and stars. Do not make reward junkies out of kids. They need to learn to derive satisfaction from their achievement, not your reaction.

Conversely, there is no need to say, "No. That's wrong. You made a mistake." Often, it is enough to wait, or shift your position slightly.

- 13. Tutors have to be organized.** Searching around on a cluttered desk for a worksheet or a book wastes time and loses the attention of a student.

- 14. The most effective way of improving the spelling of an older student is to develop a personal spelling pack.** Words that a student misspells in his own writings are selected by the tutor and placed on 3 by 5 cards for repeated drill and study over a long period of time, until they are firmly established in the motor system. The tutor should make the cards. Students misspell words that they know, not because they are careless, but because nobody can do two things at once...think about spelling and think about ideas.

Learning the words that are in the student's own writing vocabulary is the best way to improve spelling where it really counts...not on the weekly spelling test, but in spontaneous written work.

If tutors are stuck with 20 words a week...actually the stupidest and most inefficient way of teaching a child to spell ever devised, for it treats all words as learned words...they should at least be able to group the words for the child into phonetic words, rule words, and words that really do have to be memorized by writing them and devising mnemonic devices.

- 15. Tutors benefit from making visual materials and bringing them to class to share with their colleagues.** Much of the commercially produced materials is poor.

- 16. Tutors need to practice the art of prompting and questioning, rather than supplying the correct spelling, or reading, encouraging guesswork from looking at pictures or context.** There are four categories of errors in spelling:
1] phonological

A student writes 'kep' for 'kept'. Listen to me, now you say it and listen to yourself. You left something out. Read what you wrote.

2] motor and handwriting A student writes 'doat' for 'boat' or 'flim' for 'film'. Check it. You've flipped something.

Put your hands on the table and make the BED.

3] rule A student writes 'gro' for 'grow'. How do you spell /o/ on the end of a word? Coming or coming? What is the base word? What is the suffix? What is the rule?

4] learned word A student writes 'frend' for 'friend' or 'thay' for 'they'. This is one of those words that just has to be memorized. Let me put it on a card for you to add to your personal spelling pack.

Then in reading: 'Fat' for 'fate'. What does the silent 'e' do? Makes the letter say its name. 'Sore' for 'sour'. What does 'ou' say? 'Labble' for 'label'. The first syllable is open. The first vowel says its name.

Once, I watched a tutor spend four minutes teaching a child to decode the word geography. Given the skill level of the student, she should have simply supplied the word without comment and continued the reading. Omissions and insertions of small words would be corrected by simply not moving the pencil on to the next word. Tutors need to have an opportunity to practice these skills.

17. Teach tutors to observe. Videos are useful in this connection. "Did you notice? What could the tutor have done differently?"

What we are doing at all times is diagnostic-prescriptive teaching. Tutoring a dyslexic student is not something you can do formulaically. There is no cookbook. There is no recipe that will work for all students.

Cultivate observation. Observing other tutors demonstrate or, perhaps because it is easier to stop and watch again, watching a video is a fine place to begin.

Another possibility for sharpening powers of observation is to have tutors watch a lesson and note all the uses made of various modalities. Then note times when 2 specific modalities are involved, e.g., auditory-kinesthetic or visual-auditory.

18. Tutors have to learn what works with a particular student and what turns a student off. The right admixture of seriousness and fun. When a game works and when a student will consider it undignified or babyish. Some students are over-stimulated by games and become overly excited. Alternatively, that is all they want to do. Incidentally, games should be used judiciously and rarely.

This is tough, but tutors have to learn to gauge the mood of a child the minute the child walks into the room. Sometimes the carefully planned lesson has to be abandoned. If you don't notice what is going on, you can be surprised by a sudden splash of tears on the spelling paper.

19 Touch typing is a crucial skill and tutors should be taught how to teach it.

Hunt and peck is not kinesthetic and will do nothing to improve spelling.

20. How to deal with comprehension. Comprehension is a complex subject. First of all, it is not measured by a comprehension test. We assume that when a child takes a test, he will do what we do...read the paragraphs and then answer the questions. Well, he may, but not necessarily. He may just answer the questions, or merely fill in the little circles. Nor, incidentally, can we assume that a vocabulary test is a measure of vocabulary. The child who defines 'victor' as 'injured person' or 'glow' as 'get larger' may not know what the words mean, but more likely, he misread 'victor' as 'victim' and 'glow' as 'grow'.

Most people think they are teaching comprehension when they ask questions. I once watched a tutor working with the tutor's manual open on her desk. She interrupted her reader constantly, asked every question, and got not one wrong answer. Having students read a passage and then answer questions is not teaching comprehension, it is testing it.

The best way to teach comprehension is to get a student involved in reading and enjoying a good book. Until the decoding has reached about a fifth grade level, it is likely that all the energy has to go into the decoding and that there is nothing left for comprehension. At this stage we should be summarizing passages and acting as narrator for our student, not just quizzing him about content.

Tutors who are not familiar with good children's literature need to begin reading.

For our newsletter

HOW TO WRITE GOOD

Important but often forgotten rules of English

- Avoid alliteration. Always.
- Prepositions are not words to end sentences with.
- Avoid clichés like the plague.
- It is wrong to ever split an infinitive.
- Contractions aren't necessary.

- Foreign words and phrases are not apropos.
- Don't be redundant: don't use more words than necessary; it's highly superfluous.
- Exaggeration is a billion times worse than under statement.
- Analogies in writing are like feathers on a snake.
- Who needs rhetorical questions?

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The Studio

I dreamed I stood
in a studio
And watched two
sculptors there.
The clay they used was
a young child's mind
And they fashioned it
with care.

One was a tutor ...
the tools that were used
Were books, music,
and art.
The other a parent,
worked with a guiding
hand
And a gentle, loving
heart.

Day after day, the
tutor worked
With a touch that was
deft and sure
While the parent
standing at the side
Polished and smoothed
it o'er.

And when at last their
task was done
They were proud of
what they had wrought
For the things that they
had molded into the

child
Could neither be sold
nor bought.

And each agreed they
would have failed
If each had worked
alone
For behind the parent
stood the school
And behind the
tutor, the home.

Author Unknown