

4-2020

Consulting on Creative Writing in Undergraduate Writing Centers

Alaina Taylor
Grand Valley State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/honorsprojects>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

ScholarWorks Citation

Taylor, Alaina, "Consulting on Creative Writing in Undergraduate Writing Centers" (2020). *Honors Projects*. 789.

<https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/honorsprojects/789>

This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Research and Creative Practice at ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Projects by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

Alaina Taylor
Frederick Meijer Honors College
Senior Honors Project
Consulting on Creative Writing in Undergraduate Writing Centers

Introduction:

I've been a writing consultant at the Frederick Meijer Center for Writing and Michigan Authors for three years, and have spent this last year expanding my responsibilities as a lead writing consultant. As I've been listening to the suggestions and questions from new consultants, I kept running into the fact that many consultants were curious about consulting on work in creative genres. This interest came not only from Writing and English majors, but from consultants who were studying engineering, business, chemistry -- all who wanted to learn how to digest a creative piece and offer feedback in a productive way. I decided to put together a "Creative Writing Committee" for these consultants, which is now a group of consultants that meets to write creatively, consult on each other's work, and discuss strategies for consulting on creative work. This task force was a pretty informal one, and our mission fluctuated between being a sounding board for our own writing to a professional development-centered meeting time to discuss varying consulting strategies for consultations -- both of which inspired this project.

With this project, I compiled my notes and discussion points from each "Creative Writing Committee" meeting, and sent out a survey to other consultants of all majors to gauge how they revise their creative pieces and what form of feedback is most helpful for them. I then compiled these areas and outside research to nail down some main takeaways that will hopefully serve as a concrete strategy for approaching creative writing-based consultations in the future.

Justification

There is currently a decent amount of scholarship and discussion surrounding consulting on writing outside one's field of study, but when creative writing is introduced into the mix, it becomes more complicated. If a non-writing student is asked to consult on creative writing, they

might run into some challenges that wouldn't be present in other non-specialized consulting scenarios. Creative writing is much less objective, which makes it difficult for a non-expert to cultivate any "go-to" strategies that are universal across consultations. In my experience, many consultants depend on the outlines of a rubric or a professor's expectations when shaping their feedback on a paper; this is especially true for circumstances when the consultant is offering feedback in a genre with which they are unfamiliar. When consulting on creative work, there is no such rubric to draw from, at least not one that mirrors the stringent expectations of an academic paper. In the absence of this precedent-setting document, it will be valuable for consultants to understand the trademarks of a successful creative piece, and have the tools needed to help a student emulate that..

Personal experience

Over my three years at the Writing Center, I've had several opportunities to consult with students on their creative work. Since I'm also a writing major, I benefited from having a background with workshopping and workshop-driven language. Workshop etiquette usually involves using non-evaluative statements, of addressing craft elements over pure plot, and driving at authorial intention by asking purposeful questions -- these are all sensibilities that consulting, regardless of genre, also calls upon. However, background in a subject does not a consulting strategy make. In my own experience consulting on creative work, I've struggled with finding a way to balance my input in a way that doesn't come across as too direct. I also struggled with being able to gather a global perspective on the piece since I often only have a few minutes to interact with and digest it, and sometimes see certain pieces of the overall work

out of context. These are struggles I'm hoping to address through my research and conversations with my peers.

Assessing Consultant's Comfort Level

In order to determine how best to consult on creative writing, I felt it would be useful to get an idea of how my peers at the GVSU writing center approached consulting creative writing in their consultations, and how comfortable they felt doing so. I sent out a Google Forms survey (included in Appendix A) to the Writing Center Staff. In the survey, I asked consultants about their majors, about their experiences consulting on creative writing, and any areas they wanted to strengthen in their creative writing consulting strategies. For those who were writing majors, I also asked them which areas of their work they most often struggle with or they feel require the most feedback.

Respondents worked in an array of different majors, including Advertising and Public Relations, Writing, English, Hospitality and Tourism Management, and Finance. All of the respondents, despite their majors, responded that they felt comfortable or somewhat comfortable in consulting on creative writing. Of those who had not yet consulted on creative writing, they cited plot development and implementing non-directive feedback as the areas they felt least confident in hypothetically addressing.

I also asked the consultants who were creative writers to reflect on which parts of the creative writing process they found to be the most challenging. 62.5% of the the responder said that plot was the area they most often wanted feedback on, followed by 12.5% who wanted feedback on character development, 12.5% who wanted feedback on overall revision strategies, and 12.5% who fell in an "other" category..

I also asked consultants to discuss which areas they felt were the biggest challenges they faced when consulting on creative writing. The responses varied, but I identified a few major themes, which consisted of: worrying they would offer too much suggestion and overstep the author's creative vision and voice, and the struggle to provide actionable, analytical feedback beyond simply complimenting the student. Most of the consultants who fell in the latter group seemed to feel that this spawned from their hesitance with creative writing in general, and that they felt they didn't know enough about the subject to offer more strategic advice. I'll also use these fears when creating strategies, so that consultants can have a database of information to call upon in order to address craft more explicitly.

Creating the Committee and Preliminary Discussion

When I created the Creative Writing Committee, my original intention was to gather feedback on what consultants wanted to learn about related to consulting on creative writing. It ended up expanding beyond that, and functioning as a combined recreational writing outlet, as well as an informal, discussion-based professional development. While I typically aimed to keep the Creative Writing Committee as an open-ended opportunity, I made sure to keep the thoughts I'd gathered from my peers in mind as I facilitated our conversations and offered advice during meetings.

We typically began meetings by doing a quick check in on everyone's week, followed by a writing exercise. All of the attendants had interest in writing their own work, so we decided to incorporate that into our meetings. From there, we read our short, new pieces aloud and gave our initial reactions as peers, not as consultants. Most of the feedback was just reactionary, consisting of "I like it," or "the part where you did ____ was cool." After we'd all given our

reactions, I asked the group to then assume the role of a consultant, and continue with our feedback as if a student had brought the piece in. The biggest change that I noticed when students “put on their consultant hat” was that their language totally changed. There was a lot of “ramping up” that happened as the consultants started using a compliment sandwich format. For example: “I really like when you evoked ____ here, I wonder if you could also do that in this section.” While this is pretty standard practice for a general consultation, I noticed that we began to sound like we were in a creative workshop. After we finished offering our consultant-centered feedback, I asked them to highlight any techniques they noticed people using as they were providing feedback. The following sections outline the techniques that we discussed during our meetings, combined with secondary research to further support our discoveries.

Consulting Strategies and Research

I. Consulting Language

As mentioned above, the “compliment sandwich” approach was the most popular among the consultants. They use it often because it not only allows the student to appreciate the things they did well, but it’s also useful in helping them retarget their strengths towards the weaker sections of the piece. Especially with creative work, it’s important to cultivate a friendly, inviting space for them to share their work, so they don’t feel uncomfortable or vulnerable in that position. We also discussed the use of delivering feedback from the perspective of a reader. When constructive criticism begins with “As a reader, I noticed,” it becomes less personal. This helps outline what the consultant picked up on while reading without using any evaluative language, and it allows the author to see how their readers respond to their work, and if that aligns with their intended goal.

In the study “Hedging to Save Face,” Shiphra Ginsburg and Cees van der Vleuten investigate the purpose of effectiveness and purpose of “hedging” language. Our “as a reader” language falls in this category, since we use it as an intentional way of softening the blow of providing feedback to what is likely a very personal piece of work. Ginsburg and van der Vleuten state that hedging in a consulting or assessment-based setting is crucial because of the social implications involved with providing feedback. It’s a vulnerable position to be in with a stranger, and in order to effectively navigate that scenario, and fully benefit from the advice given, we must follow certain social codes to make the other person feel more at ease, and therefore welcoming to feedback (Ginsburg 2016). Sharing your writing is always a vulnerable act, but sharing your creative work can be much scarier, since it’s often more personal. Using hedging language and being purposeful with your feedback is a great tool in the writing consultant’s repertoire, and can be the difference between a successful interaction and a difficult one.

II. Non-Directive Suggestion

Since many consultants cited that they were concerned about overstepping when working on a creative piece, I’m glad we were able to have some meaningful discussion about navigating non-directive feedback. A non-directive strategy diverts authority back to the student, who is considered the expert in that subject. This is empowering for the student, but also ensures that the consultant will not overstep and unknowingly make a suggestion that wouldn’t be appropriate for the context of the assignment. This non-directive strategy sets the consulting experience apart from a writing workshop. In my experience in those classroom workshop settings, there’s far more directive feedback than what can possibly be helpful. Because the rest of the class also

writes creatively, they're often thinking about how they would have written the piece, and will make plot-based or stylistic suggestions that might undermine the author's original intention. In a consulting scenario, it's important to maintain a bit of distance to allow for the author to maintain the ultimate authority over the piece -- this is even more important in a creative sphere. Creative work offers so many opportunities for changes, that any overt, directive contribution can be transformative.

In the article "Tutoring in Unfamiliar Subjects," Alexis Greiner explores how a writing consultant should approach offering feedback in a subject that they know little about. She reiterates that a non-directive or suggestion-driven approach is always ideal for consultants; this ensures that the consultant will not overstep and unknowingly make a suggestion that wouldn't be appropriate for the context of the assignment. This article set the groundwork for my understanding about how "non-experts" can effectively consult outside the genres that they're most familiar with. Greiner also makes the point that non-experts shouldn't view their perspective as secondary to that of an expert. She states that since non-experts don't interact with that genre as often, they usually have a more unique approach to providing feedback, and will notice things that seasoned professionals might skip over because they are so accustomed to offering feedback in the genre in the same way (Greiner 2005) Many of the consultants that were most interested in learning about creative writing consulting strategies were those who studied outside of the writing field, so I think it's important to consider "non-experts" and the value they bring to a creative consultation.

III. Audience Expectations

Although creative writing has lots of freedoms that aren't necessarily afforded to other genres, they still benefit from the same rhetorical structures that academic papers do. It's common practice to question a student about some of these rhetorical components when they come in with an academic paper; I've often asked about the purpose of their paper and the message they're intending to communicate. This is a great strategy for ensuring the student and consultant are on the same page, and acts as a method of agenda-setting for the consultation. Throughout our discussion during the Creative Writing Committee, I discovered that many of these elements can still be useful in the creative sphere, specifically with considering their audience. Creative writing within the structure of a classroom setting still receives a grade, and therefore must meet certain standards of expectation, though those expectations may not be as clear-cut as in some other genres. In several of the creative writing classes that I've had, professors have specified that they look for complex character development and a strong plot when they're evaluating work, elements that I feel consultants should keep in mind while reading a student's work. In general though, anchoring base with what product the student feels they are expected to deliver is crucial -- you don't want to make a suggestion that will take their work down the wrong path.

In Andy Crockett's article "Straddling the Rhet Comp Creative Writing Schism" he delves into the intersection between creative work and rhetorical structures, aiming to close the gaps that seemingly divide them. Crockett posits that successful creative artists develop their craft not by exclusively relying on innate talent, but by having an overt intention with their work. Regardless of the mode, the authors have audiences in mind, and a purpose for creating their work (Crockett 1998). This is something that consultants can use as a guide to navigate creative

writing consultations when they're unsure how to handle more craft-based questions. The most important part of any writing, creative or academic, is the intention and vision the author has for the work. Talking with the writer in an open, encouraging way will allow the consultant to find the "why" behind their work and use that to inform their consulting.

IV. Plot/Generating Ideas

When consulting with academic work, it's extremely common that a student will want to brainstorm their essay topic, or outline their paper before they fully begin drafting. While this hasn't yet been relevant for me in a creative consultation, many of the respondents and members of the Creative Writing Committee voiced that they felt unprepared to help a student with conceptualizing a piece, or working on broader elements associated with plot. As a group, we didn't come up with many ideas for how to tackle this particular area -- we all felt it may need to be addressed on a case-by-case basis. I turned to secondary research to help track down some tactics we could use that would have general appeal.

Sarah Irwin and Cyndi Knodle discuss ways to spark creativity in their article "Mandates and the Writing Curriculum: Creating a Place to Dwell." This delves into how to best enhance a student's creativity and inspiration when working with them on a creative piece. They suggest a principle that they refer to as an "invention period" where a student's enthusiasm for writing can be built up by having them write out all their ideas -- whether they believe that they will pursue them or not. They then suggest that in order to narrow down these potential topics, that the feedback-giver should direct them to ask a series of questions about each topic in order to drive towards the depth behind their original idea. They call on Aristotle's *topoi* principle, that asks authors to define what they're writing about, consider the context of the story they're creating,

and compare it to either existing work or other pieces they have written. They also preach the necessity of “pre-writing” in which the student can think over several topics before putting pen to paper (Irwin 2008). I think many students visit the writing center expecting a tangible outcome -- 500 more words, a comprehensive outline, etc. It’s especially important to show the students that discussing their ideas and trying to map them out in their mind is still a significant part of the writing process. It’s just as valuable as any other phase, and yet is commonly underrated as a writing strategy. I think I would encourage consultants working with creative writing students to impress this upon them when they come into the center with the intention of choosing a topic. We, as consultants, are there to stoke inspiration, not write the piece for them.

Final Thoughts

Consulting on creative work is an area that many writing center employees have expressed skepticism about. It can be daunting -- it feels nearly impossible to think of a way to benefit the student beyond saying “this is good!” without infusing too much of the consultant’s thoughts into the piece. While we don’t see students bringing in creative work nearly as often as academic work, there are plenty of situations in which a consultant would need to be prepared to consult on a creative-based piece. The obvious one, and the one this paper has honed in on, is work from creative writing students, who are working on fiction, poetry, and creative non-fiction classes. However, nearly every Writing 150 student (the biggest section of our client base) is expected to write a narrative-style paper, and they often feel tentative about the more creative sides to it. This guide should be easily applicable to those circumstances that every consultant will likely find themselves in at one time or another. It’s also worth noting that while these

strategies were designed with creative writing in mind, they can be equally applicable and relevant to academic styles of writing.

References

Crocket, A. (1998) Straddling the Rhet/Comp Creative Writing Schism. *Writing on the Edge*, 9 (2), 83-97. Retrieved March 3, 2020 from www.jstor.org/stable/43157062

Ginsburg, S., van der Vleuten, C., Linguard, L. (2016) Hedging to save face: a linguistic analysis of written comments on in-training evaluation reports. *Advances in Health Sciences*

Education. 21. 175-188. Retrieved from
<https://doi-org.ezproxy.gvsu.edu/10.1007/s10459-015-9622-0>

Greiner, A. (2005). "Tutoring in Unfamiliar Subjects." *A Tutor's Guide: Helping Writers One on One*. Edited by Ben Rafoth. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers.

Irwin, S., & Knodle, C. (2008). Mandates and the Writing Curriculum: Creating a Place to Dwell. *The English Journal*, 97(5), 40-45. Retrieved April 2, 2020, from www.jstor.org/stable/30046882

Appendix I: Consultant Survey

Survey of Creative Writing Students and their Processes Results

Email:

Name:

Year:

Major:

Semesters as a consultant:

If you are a writing student, which of these do you most often struggle with/want the most feedback on:

- Conceptualizing
- Character work
- Plot and Story Arc
- Stylistic Elements
- Revision
- Other

Do you currently feel prepared/adequately trained to consult on creative writing in the center?

Have you had any experience consulting with creative work?

If so, what were the biggest challenges?

What strategies did you employ that worked well? (Ex: positive feedback, workshop-drive language, etc.)

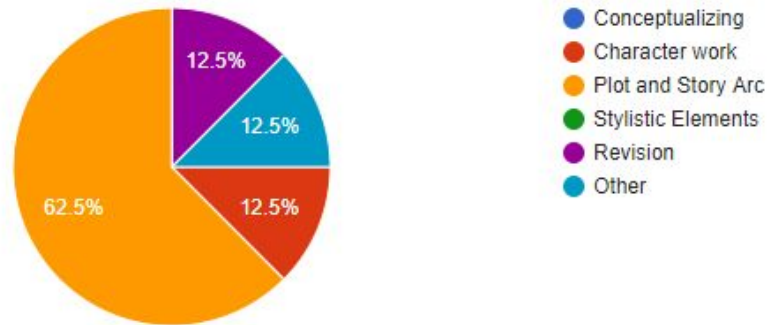
What's one thing about consulting on creative writing that you'd like to know more about?

Appendix II: Consultant Survey Responses

Results from consultants on the areas in which they are unsure of how to provide feedback

If you write creatively, which of these do you most often struggle with/want the most feedback on?

8 responses



Have you had any experience consulting with creative work? If so, what were the biggest challenges?

- The student not wanting feedback about their actual writing or content because they just want grammar or mechanics looked at
- Trying to keep the writer's vision in mind while helping them generate new ideas, check grammar and style without changing their voice.
- It's difficult to say more than just, "I liked it!" Since creative writing is inherently more subjective, it's easy to be subjective in the feedback, and leave it at general praise without providing specifics or suggestions.
- For longer pieces, time is an element that adds to the challenge. For others, it can be difficult to be honest with the student about any faults while still building rapport with the student.
- When consulting on creative writing, obstacles seem to occur most when it comes to poetry, as I have not taken a poetry class in years! I am not familiar with the rules for each type of poem, how many lines each should have, and other aspects.
- I think coming up with a powerful and interesting plot would be most difficult.
- Trying to find the line between making helpful suggestions and imposing myself on a creative work

What strategies did you employ that worked well? (Ex: positive feedback, workshop-drive language, etc.)

- Focusing on explaining to the student how the writing presents the characters and the story to you to see if that is what they are wanting the reader to feel or see

- I've found that pointing out specifics of what I like is usually a good place to start. Sometimes this can give the writer an idea for a pattern that they can establish. I also think expressing my reactions to the piece is more important in creative writing consultations. It's important to let the writer know when you were surprised, when you were uncomfortable or unsure, when your interest is piqued. Asking questions can also be helpful, like, "Do you know where you're planning to take the piece from here?" or "Do you plan on adding more backstory for this character," or "What sort of emotion do you want to leave the reader with?"
- Positive feedback is key, and also anecdotes and analogies too.
- I have definitely utilized positive feedback, and also let the student explain the assignment/goal in detail to me, so I can try to visualize what the student is trying to portray with their writing. I let the student guide the consultation and tell me when and where they need my assistance as we move along the writing.
- I'd like to know how to help students with plotting. I feel like I'm better with stylistic choices and revisions right now, but if a student wanted help working with story ideas or planning plot points, I'd feel kinda stuck. Overall, I guess work with brainstorming for creative writing would be helpful to know more about.

What's one thing about consulting on creative writing that you'd like to know more about?

- How to guide a student in brainstorming good story ideas--"Good" meaning interesting to other readers, not just to the student writing them.
- How to properly consult a poem!!
- The general rules in poetry and/or creative writing!
- I know this isn't very helpful, but everything? I guess the highest risk area for me would be plot development, as that can have a very profound effect on a piece overall.