Counseling in the Writing Center

HOW MOTIVATIONAL INTERVIEWING CAN IMPROVE CONSULTANT AND CLIENT EXPERIENCE

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Before my first consulting session as a Cadet Writing Fellow, I worried how I would fill the time with my client—nearly an entire hour. How would our dialogue go? Should I ask questions? Would I have the client complete an activity as I read through their work? Would I customize my methods for every new client? After some reflection, I began to consider how I could apply my own field of study to my consultation strategies.

As a psychology major and Peer Support Counselor, I’ve spent much of my cadet career learning and practicing ways to communicate more effectively with those around me. While counseling techniques may seem like something only psychologists and counselors need to know, I believe they can enhance any social interaction, especially those that take place in learning environments like writing centers.

I was first drawn to the idea of connecting my discipline to the writing center after reading the work of scholar Joan Hawthorne, who suggests concrete steps for writing center consultants to become more sensitive and flexible in their responses to client needs. Reading Hawthorne, I realized the educational tools I was picking up in my counseling classes could go hand-in-hand with writing center methods—and so they have during my time at West Point.

“Sarah, this is the Writing Center. I’m here to help people become better writers, not talk about their feelings. Why do I need to learn about counseling?” As Writing Fellows, we have less than an hour to meet a client, talk through their work, and equip them with takeaways that will help with both their assignment as well as future writing projects. Admittedly, that’s a lot to accomplish—but applying counseling techniques will help you make the most of the interaction.

“You talk a big game, but how exactly does psychology apply here?” Writing center clients are bringing pieces to us that they have spent a lot of time and effort on, and they’re looking for support and assistance. This is no simple task! Whether your client is a plebe preparing their first college assignment or a senior completing a thesis, by bringing in their work they are opening themselves and their work up to another person. This requires a lot of trust: drawing on counseling techniques in writing center sessions builds that trust, so that consultants and clients can ultimately grow together.

“Do you have anything that backs this up?” A common set of techniques in counseling is known as Motivational Interviewing (MI). In their book on MI, William Miller and Stephen Rollnick clearly describe it as a tool for exactly the kinds of collaborative conversations that writing centers also seek to foster—all to the end of strengthening motivation and dedication for clients as well as consultants.
Motivational Interviewing in Practice

Below are some basic MI moves to add to your toolkit; I’ve also included some working definitions—adapting the moves to a writing center context—and concrete examples to get you started.

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| Open-Ended Questions | Open-ended questions are simply questions that cannot be answered with a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no.’ As such, they provoke the client to think more deeply; they also make space for a client to offer their story or situation in their own words—not just by checking a generic box or two on appointment forms. Open-ended questions are valuable at many junctures of a session; for instance, when posed near the outset they can help with a client’s initial buy-in and the business of negotiating a consultation’s main focus. | What are your biggest concerns for this assignment?  
Can you tell me about your typical writing process?  
I saw on your appointment form that you marked a concern with grammar and mechanics. Can you tell me more about that—what specifically gives you trouble? |
| Affirmations       | Affirmations recognize clients’ strengths or moments of success, whether in terms of behavior, process, or product. By identifying and explicitly commending positives, Writing Fellows establish their interest in and concern for client. In turn, clients often grow more confident about their abilities and more receptive to feedback on how to build on them. Moreover, affirmations open the door to mutual learning as well—genuine exchange and collaboration. | Thanks for being on time for your appointment—it’s a hectic day!  
That’s an interesting approach to brainstorming; I will have to try it.  
This part of your argument is fascinating to me. I particularly like how you explain ___. |
| Reflective Listening | Reflective listening is a sort of active mirroring through which Writing Fellows paraphrase or repeat clients’ ideas back to them. This way a client will know you’re really listening, for one, but there are myriad other benefits too: by articulating your version of a client’s speech or writing, you can test their ideas for clarity or viability; in other instances, you’ll be able to model for a client alternatives phrasings for their ideas (often in more formal or precise language). | So what I hear you saying is that these two readings are similar because ___.  
Let me see if I understand. Is your main idea here ___?  
What I’m getting from this sentence is ___. Is that right? |
| Summary Reflections | Summary reflections—concise recaps that remind clients of key points—are most obviously useful near a session’s end, though you can also use them throughout to punctuate or crystallize different moments of learning. Such reflections often help a client move from concerns about an individual paper to broader insights about sound writing principles or practices. | Let’s recap: the key takeaway for me today is ___. What about you?  
Here’s the point: ___. This will be useful to you with other papers in this department down the road... |

A Note to Writing Fellows: The main goal of this guide is merely to introduce you to additional tools for the writing center; no one becomes a professional in counseling overnight or by reading a brief guide. But this will get you on your way. As Cadet Writing Fellows, we have a unique set of roles and responsibilities in the academic environment: we have similar academic loads as our clients as well as various Chain of Command duties to them; we’ve also taken—or will take—many of the same classes as our clients as well as completed—or will complete—many of the same assignments. With our training in writing pedagogy, this ideally positions us to offer genuine empathy and encouragement. Let’s keep working hard at it!

This writing guide was authored by CDT Sarah Donaldson (‘21) in the context of academic coursework for the Writing Fellows Program at the United States Military Academy. It is informed by William R. Miller and Stephen Rollnick’s *Motivational Interviewing: Helping People Change* (3rd ed), The Guilford Press, 2012. It also includes a free use image from the public domain. This guide has been edited and produced by Dr. Jason Hoppe, West Point Writing Program. 2021.