

## *The Look and Feel of the OWL Conference*

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**T**HE ONLINE WRITING AND LEARNING (OWL) AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN grew out of our face-to-face (f2f) peer tutoring program in many ways. Although our OWL website includes links to other OWLs that offer electronic handouts, our primary purpose is to respond to writers' needs, online, person-to-person. Like many OWLs, our online tutorial is technically conducted by means of asynchronous electronic mail, which clients can also access through the web. When we first decided to offer writing conferences online in 1994, we saw this move as simply an extension of our peer tutoring program. Not surprisingly, then, our online and f2f tutorials are close kin, borne of the same principles and practices. Our writing conference, both online and off, is based on a one-to-one, rather than one-to-many, instructional model and a collateral power relationship: peer-to-peer rather than a teacher-to-student. Consistent with that rationale, our OWL and f2f conference use the same activities, such as conducting diagnostic work and establishing conference priorities. Our tutors also worry about the same pedagogical issues, such as finding ways to engage clients as collaborative partners in the conference enterprise. And both OWL and f2f tutors work within the same constraints inherent to our walk-in program: our tutors can not count on seeing the same clients or the same paper assignment again, and so their conferences attempt to be comprehensive and specific at the same time.

But a key point of difference is that an OWL conference is a written artifact with its own look-and-feel, and as such, can be productively described and analyzed as a genre unto itself. Largely through trial and error, and verified by client feedback studies as part of our training seminar, our tutors have developed what we believe is an effective online pedagogy, specific to an asynchronous electronic environment. While the formal features of the OWL conference have stabilized over the past three years, each OWL conference reflects a tutor's own persona and conferencing style.<sup>1</sup> The centripetal trends of our OWL conference give it shape as a genre; individual tutors's variations on that form suggest the centrifugal pull on that genre, very much in a Bakhtinian sense. As a genre unto itself, the OWL conference can be productively described and analyzed. At first glance, the

OWL conference has a standard shape, but a closer look reveals a wide range of discursive practices at play within that formal framework.

#### THE LOOK OF AN OWL CONFERENCE

The actual procedure of our online tutorial is not unlike that of our f2f service. The OWL conference begins when a client first “comes in” (by way of our webbed OWL) and fills out a mailform (<http://www.lsa.umich.edu/ecb/OWL/mailform.html>). This form asks the client to identify what year student he is, what class the paper is for, and when it is due — information that gives the tutor a context for the conference. The mailform page also asks the client to explain the assignment and identify what kind of help he is seeking before asking him to copy, paste, and submit his paper. The tutor reads the paper through and thoroughly, usually more than once, before writing a response and sending the “conference” back to the client. Within 48 hours (as per our policy), usually much sooner, a client receives a “conference” from the tutor in the form of a personal email message, signed with a first name, a thoughtful, friendly, well-composed response from an experienced reader and accomplished writer in her own right. This is what a conference might look like to the client:<sup>2</sup>

Hi Curtis—

[1] My name is Sean and I’m an ECB OWL tutor. I’ve read your paper, and I have some suggestions for you. I guess I’ll give my general feedback and then my specifics. My specific stuff will be set off **\*\*\*Like This\*\*\***

Generally, I think you’ve got a nice, picturesque little tableau here: pretty well detailed, and certainly very pretty. If you’re trying to think of avenues for expansion of the material, there are a couple of things I can suggest:

One thing to think about is a sort of narrative. I understand that this is not a specifically narrative essay, but there is an observer who is describing this scene. Why is this the scene that sticks with you particularly? Is this a general, timeless scene, or do you really want to foreground one particular time, and if you do, what is the narrator doing there, and why is it so important? I think there are shadows of these issues already sort of dancing at the edges of your essay, so if you bump them up you’ll take up space and you can add more of a human dimension to this scene.

The other thing I’d encourage is just to really really really push at your description: make it as specific and sensory as possible. I’ll show you what I mean in the specifics, so I guess we might as well just move right along to those:

On Tue, 18 Mar 1997, Curtis McDonald wrote:

- >
- > Name: Curtis McDonald
- > Class the paper for: Eng125
- > Assignment : Describe a landscape

> help looking for: how could I expand the paper? It is too short.

>

> The Harbor

> It was rare to have such a sunny day in this city.

[2] \*\*\*what city?\*\*\*

> The sky was blue with no clouds; it merged with the tranquil ocean at the  
> far end of the world. The wind blew gently and brushed away all the  
> dampness. The afternoon sun shared its warmth with everybody, driving  
> away the cold of the winter. I decided to go for a walk.

\*\*\*This is pretty much perfect, as far as description of the weather, I think. It's beautifully detailed. My one quibble is that all we see here is the sky: what about the city? What does the sidewalk look like in the sun after a long winter? How about the grass? The buildings? In other words, why not turn your attention to the rest of the city instead of just the sky overhead. Also, if you wanted to bump up the narrative aspect: what's happening inside the narrator? Why specifically does the narrator go for a walk? Just for the good weather, or something else?\*\*\*

> I arrived at the harbor sidewalk. The gorgeous view offered by the  
> sidewalk attracted many citizens to spend their spare time here. I sat down  
> on one of benches on the sidewalk and immersed myself into

\*\*\*I think you just want "in" here instead of "into."\*\*\*

> the beautiful sunset. I could see the high rise skyscrapers on the opposite  
> side of the Victoria Harbor, forming a continuous wall of concrete.  
> The Central Plaza, like the Empire State building in New York, stood up  
> against the other structures.

\*\*\*Okay good, it stands out: How? What does it look like? I can't really see it (the Empire State has a very specific shape, is the Central Plaza similarly shaped, or does it just stand out the same way? )\*\*\*

> The sunlight shined on the reflective glass walls of the buildings, making  
> them look like

\*\*\*You don't need the "like" here, I think.\*\*\*

> golden-plated. Above the harbor, the sea gulls circled to find their dinner,  
> singing happily and enjoying this evening.

> This sidewalk is one of my favorite places, because I could see the  
> ocean, and I used to go to here when I feel

\*\*\*I think you want past tense here: "felt."\*\*\*

> gloomy.

\*\*\*Is the narrator feeling gloomy now? If so, why? (These questions are just intended to open up avenues to expand the text, by the way, not just to be a jerk. )\*\*\*

> I like to hear the waves bouncing on the sidewalk, creating a harmonic  
> symphony. I would gaze at the waves of the ocean, wondering how deep  
> the ocean is. Being close to the sea gives me a calm and peaceful feeling.

\*\*\*Okay this paragraph is very good, except for the last four words. It's not that there's anything wrong with the words themselves, it's just that they're not as specific as they could be: what exactly do you feel? Heavy eyelids? Warm skin? Do your arms rest lightly on your legs? Do you feel like you're underwater? What, in short, is the physical manifestation of this feeling?\*\*\*

- > I also like to watch the people at the sidewalk. I saw quite a lot of
- > people were relaxing under the warm sunshine. Two old men sat on the
- > edge of the fence fishing, lowering their tackles, and waiting patiently for
- > the fish to eat their bait. A bunch of tourists walked along the sidewalk
- > taking pictures. Two young executives dressed in suits leaned against the
- > fence looking to the far side of the ocean. As if they were trying to escape
- > from the high pressure in this fast-paced city.
- > A pair of lovers walked along the sidewalk hand in hand, smiling and
- > whispering in each other's ears. Another couple sat on the bench hugging
- > each other. Three teenagers roller bladed on the pathway, trying to do some
- > difficult jumps.

\*\*\*The people watching here is good. More material here: linger a little longer on each. That is: let us watch the fishermen for a paragraph instead of a sentence. How do they tie on their bait? How do they cast? The same with all the rest. You don't have to spend an equal amount of time on all of them, but I think these people could be watched a little more, and that'll add to your description.\*\*\*

- > Above the ocean were numerous boats and ships. They left long white
- > lines after they cut through the serene surface of the ocean. Ferries
- > crisscrossed between huge cargo ships. Fishing boats came home after a day
- > of hard work, I could almost see the smiling faces of the fishermen from a
- > distance.

\*\*\*This is a nice image, but again, I can't "see" the different types of boats. Aside from numerous, what do they look like? Small fishing boats and freighters don't look alike, so you can spend some time here looking at each type of boat.\*\*\*

- > The orange street lights finally light up. The street lights line up in a
- > row along the sidewalk. On the opposite side of the harbor, the skyscrapers
- > gradually died down. Big neon advertising signs light up. I could see small
- > lights comes out from each family kitchens, I could almost smell the dinner
- > they were making.

\*\*\*Great! Getting smell into a description is always a good idea. I'd say that you really want to push this: what elements of food do you smell here? Meat? Fish? Or is it less identifiable? Even if it is, it should smell like something, which will remind the narrator of food.\*\*\*

- > Dong . . . dong . . . dong . . .
- > I looked at the clock tower from the pier, it was already seven o'clock.
- > Though I did not want to leave, I have to say good bye. I knew I would
- > come back again.
- > Good bye Victoria Harbor.

\*\*\*Now we're back to narrative here: why say goodbye? Is this an event, a leaving for a long time, if not for good? If it is, it weights things differently, and we should understand that throughout. In other words, you can play up the occasion for this telling, the narrative reason for this description.

[3] Anyway, I hope this has been helpful. Thanks for Flying OWL!

Sean

If an OWL conference is read straight through by the client, he might hear the tutor sequence his remarks much as he would in a f2f conference. The conference visibly has three parts that have become standard practice in our program: [1] *the front note*, opening overview comments that introduce the tutor and establish rapport, that acknowledge the client's stated concerns (e.g. development) and set (or re-direct, as the case may be) conference priorities (e.g. focus, counter-arguments, insufficient support); [2] *the intertextual commentary*, remarks within the text of the paper itself that locate specific instances of the conference priorities; and [3] *the end notes*, closing remarks that serve as a disclaimer, encourage revision, and/or remind the client of our f2f service.

While these three parts lend the OWL conference a generic framework, we see a wide range of rhetorical strategies at play within each of those parts. A descriptive analysis of each part—the front note, the intertextual commentary, and the end note—will identify what has become standard about those strategies.<sup>3</sup>

#### A CLOSER LOOK AT FRONT NOTES

Most of the work of the OWL conferences gets done in the front note. This work always includes these four main activities: 1) opening the conference by introducing the tutor by name and the conference procedures; 2) discussing the assignment parameters; 3) addressing the client's stated concerns; and 4) summarizing writing strengths and indicating revision priorities. The praise and criticism implicit in this last touchpoint of the front note are usually handled in tandem, but in a rich variety of ways.

#### Opening the conference

In the opening lines of the front note, the tutor greets the writer by name, introduces himself, and lays out how the conference will proceed. This procedural orientation includes telling the client that this front note is general commentary, with intertextual comments pointing to specific examples of the general critique layered within the writer's text that follows. Sometimes tutors thank clients for sending in their papers and encourage them to answer back if they have questions, but most save that for their closing remarks in the end note. In fact, a few prefer to save all the summary commentary for the end, a strategy they believe encourage clients to keep reading; those that follow this format always tell their clients where they can find the general commentary and immediately launch into their intertextually comment. Experienced tutors settle into

their own self-devised template wording for this first line or so, some more expansive than others:

Hi Sue,

It's Sean again. I've read your paper and I have some comments for you, some sort of general stuff and some specifics. I guess I'll give you the general stuff first, and then move into the specifics intertextually. My intertextual comments will be set off **\*\*\*Like This\*\*\***

=====

Hi William! Thanks for sending a paper to our OWL — I hope I'll be able to be helpful to you.

With even a simple opener as the one immediately above, the tutor immediately begins the interpersonal work of the conference. Sometimes a tutor makes overt attempts at connecting, when appropriate, based on what the writer has shared about himself in his writing:

I've really enjoyed reading your fascinating paper. I have a very close friend whose brother is autistic and I feel that I have a much broader understanding now of what's going on with both of them.

#### Discussing the Assignment

In the next portion of the front note, the tutor customizes the conference to the specific writer's needs and the requirements of the assignment based on what information the client has supplied in the web mailform. Because this information grounds the assumptions for the conference, the tutor takes care to "say-back" his understanding of the assignment. If the tutor is not sure that the client has met the required guidelines, he will explicate what he sees as possible points of difference, giving alternative explanations but leaving the final decision to the client:

If you're trying to write the kind of review you'd see in a newspaper, I think you're on track (though you may go overboard sometimes). If, however, you're supposed to be constructing an argument based on the movie [Independence Day], I think you may want to seriously re-think the essay in terms of what we can learn from the movie in spite of the fact that it's terrible (what does it show that such a bad piece of cinema is one of the top grossing films of all time? Why did it hit so many of our buttons, so to speak?) Anyway, since your tone is so much closer to the former interpretation (like a newspaper), I'll assume that's what you're shooting for, and restrict my comments to how well that style is working.

Tutors often let clients know if they have had the same class and the same assignment, a gesture that promotes a peer relationship and establishes tutors' credentials at the same time. Sometimes the tutor explicitly evokes the instructor

as the final word as a way of reassuring the client and, paradoxically, as a way of urging him to revise, as in the following two examples:

For example, you refer to the author's use of the term "the border," but don't explain what it is. Okay, I understand that your teacher will understand this reference and be familiar with the article, but often it's a good idea to show that you have a good understanding of the terms and issues as well (which I think you do, so it shouldn't be a problem).

=====

That is, why not include a really detailed analysis of that, since it's important (also, teachers LOVE close readings where you pull apart a piece of text and squeeze every last thing out of it that you can get.)

Mentioning the instructor as evaluator can also serve as a kind of disclaimer, especially when the tutor really does think the paper is substantially complete:

It seems to me that it's exactly what your instructor's looking for: a personal anecdote that has a larger meaning. I think the structure of your essay is fine: a good, short intro, a tightly-drawn retelling of the fight and retaliation (with the exception of a few minor structural details that I'll talk about later), and an introspective conclusion. Very nice work.

A tutor might own up to her limitation, given an assignment in an unfamiliar discipline, but the covert strategy here is not really to disclaim responsibility. A tutor's apparent self-disparagement may aim to soften the blow of criticism—

Your audience, you say, is educated non-biologists (which fits me to a T), and for such people, I think you're going to need to really look at your material and think of the clearest, most concise way of saying what you want to say (because I was confused sometimes, and I've had to wade through more than my fair share of Darwinian theory). I guess I'll show you what I mean within the text. . .

—and at the same time to invite the client to make some choices—in other words, actively engage and collaborate:

I have to admit that I'm not that familiar with the workings of a psych research paper, so some things I'm gonna have to trust you on, or I'll register my concerns about argument or structure or whatever, and then you can consider whether those comments are appropriate for a study like this.

### Addressing Client Concerns

Either while discussing the assignment or subsequent to it, the tutor directly acknowledges and responds to the writer's questions and concerns.

Beyond that, the tutor also gives the writer some indication of the relative importance of those concerns, both in terms of this paper specifically and the writing process generally. The ultimate goal of the one-to-one conference, online or off, is to produce better writers, not better papers, a mantra of our program. In that spirit, the tutor gives specific suggestions rather than recites generic rules. In the following example, the writer obviously knows the general rule that introductions need to launch the paper and engage the reader; what she does not know is how to apply the rule in this instance. Or she is simply blocked. The tutor's suggestions are specific enough to propel her toward revision but also general enough for her to have to make choices as well as do the actual writing herself:

Alright you asked, and I'm answering: no, I don't think the introduction is as effective as you want it to be. I think a better way of approaching both the introduction and the paper in general might be to give us a specific organism or family of organisms and show how natural selection effects them (You know: the British Peppered moth example, a population separated by water which speciates, heck any one of a number of things. Something for the introduction could be the genesis of the term natural selection (as opposed to the kind of artificial selection which had been practised for years prior, breeding horses, dogs, pigeons and so on to get various traits.)\*\*

The concern that clients most often say they want help with is "grammar." Admittedly, the OWL conference is not very conducive to sentence-level instruction. Indicating errors with the body of the paper, intertextually, impedes readability, especially when a paper has many surface errors. More important, we actively work against the image of the writing center as "fix-it shop," so just "correcting" papers without comment is not an option. Although the medium is not friendly to grammar/mechanics instruction, clients nonetheless need to be aware that surface error is distracting to the reader and/or disrupting meaning. And it is possible to have intelligent and useful discussions on grammatical and mechanical issues online, discussions that go beyond reciting the rules. In the following example, the tutor talks about local problems in terms of stylistic decisions:

Overall, you've got a really nice story. There are some grammatical issues that come in to play, namely comma splices. There are a few examples of what could be considered run-on sentences, but I almost hesitate to comment on those. When you write a paper such as this and fall back into a past time, there are several liberties that can be taken. I'll try to elaborate on what I mean. I once wrote a paper about when I was twelve, and I did my best to make it sound as though I was twelve. By including run-on sentences and vocabulary that was particular to a twelve-year old, I hoped to make my readers believe that my narrator was, in fact, a twelve-year old. Your story jumps back to the second grade, and your "style" fits that time period. Your use of the word "Well" in transitional spots is one way to affect your voice. When I read, "Well, I went to . . . etc.", it reminds



me of the way a kid might tell a story. It's a smart usage on your part, but you may want to read through your paper once more to make certain you're using it strategically. Over-usage will rob the best literary devices of their effect. :)

Tutors always follow up within the text itself, in the intertextual part of the OWL conference, in order to establish the pattern of error, but only for a page or so, explicitly noting to clients that they need to follow through. For really difficult syntax work, clients are encouraged to come in for f2f conferences. Even for papers with less prevalent problems, like spelling, tutors still remind clients to polish and proofread their final drafts, with special attention paid to specified problems.

### Handling Praise/Criticism

The information that the client supplied on the mail form has driven the conference thus far. At this point in the front note, acknowledging the writer's concerns, either justified or not, gives the tutor the opening for talking about a paper's strengths and weaknesses, or what tutors call "the good news and the bad news." This is the part of the conference that tutors worry the most about and spend the most time on. Ironically, the spontaneous effect that most tutors strive for in handling praise and criticism takes very deliberate effort.

Standardization of the praise/criticism portion of the front note has emerged both as matter of policy and as a matter of practice. Our policy directive is simply that tutors be honest in their appraisals. They should always be able to identify strengths important enough not to have to resort to damning with faint praise. Genuine praise can boost a writer's trust in a tutor's criticism, which he will more likely value and take as constructive. How to give praise without patronizing and criticism without alienating is a delicate balance. In practice, female tutors tend to be more indirect in their criticism than our male tutors. In any case, tutors use a range of rhetorical strategies that aim to strike a delicate but productive balance between praise and criticism.

In complimenting effective features of clients' writing, tutors often use generic, even cliché, words of praise, like "interesting" and "great," surprisingly without sounding routine or insincere. Most often, praise is followed by an elliptical allusion to something specific in the paper. Other lexical and syntactical features are striking in this portion of the front note: hedging language to buffer criticism (i.e. "little bit", "sorta" and "kinda"); conditional modals (as in "you may want to. . ."); and client-referential comparisons; "[Details] aren't as particular as you may want them to be").

Praise and criticism can be arranged within a paragraph in straightforward or complex ways, playing both to and against reader expectations. Expecting to find the criticism right after the praise (as is so often the case with teachers' end comments), the reader can simply look for the linguistic cue that marks the transition, such as "but" or "however" or some other contrastive phrase:

So far, I think you've done a decent job of comparing the two perspectives on glory here, and showing how they accord with one another. However, I think you may want to interrogate your argument a little bit more. That is, you show that there seems to be (I'll get to the seems in a minute) a connection here, but what does that do to our understanding of the works? Why should such a connection exist? What does it tell us about the societies that produced these works, or about the type of literature they are? One of my professors put it this way: so what? that is, you've noticed something in the text—there are these similarities—now so what?

But in the following example, the tutor places the contrastive phrase (“though”) at the end of a sentence instead of at the beginning. Bluntness is further deflected by the use of “I-language” and a studied nonchalance:

I'm wondering about your plans for the future, though—and your instructor probably will, too. Are you going to college to somehow augment your present career? What are you getting a degree in? What are your big dreams? Do they dovetail with your current career goals? Just some questions that wandered through my head . . .

Another common strategy is to frustrate the reading expectation that praise and criticism will follow each other, like a one-two punch—perhaps by reversing that sequence or by not signaling the transition at all—

It is obvious that you have a very strong command of the language, and have put much effort into making this essay come across as knowledgeable and intelligent. I am afraid that you may have gone beyond your goals here, and your paper comes off sounding stilted and over-written.

—or intricately intertwining praise and criticism in a rich discussion that throws into the mix assignment expectations and revision strategies as well—

It seems to me that you've satisfied the requirements of this assignment just fine—your instructor wanted you to list the details of a typical work day and that's what you've done. . . . I'm not sure how much latitude you have with this assignment (although I would imagine you have \*some\*), but it seems like there's a couple of ways to tackle it: a strict chronology (which you've done nicely), some particular aspect of management that hits upon everything you do in a day, but not in chronological order (like working with the sound engineers or something), or maybe you could even write about a day that's both typical and atypical, like the time you did back-up partying for Maria. You probably did all the stuff you usually do that day, but having the Maria anecdote as a focus would probably liven up the paper a whole lot. Or maybe, just to grab the reader's attention, start off with a cool anecdote, then just kinda slide into the day to day workings of a sound studio. I mean not all of us are lucky enough to have close encounters

with rock stars as part of our working world—I'd go ahead and make a bigger deal of it (in a cool and nonchalant way, of course:-) The thing about chronology (first I do this, then I do this) is that it's not the most engaging way to present a day in your life. And you have an interesting life! Don't get me wrong, the way you've got the essay structured is fine, I was just tossing some ideas out that may not have occurred to you in case you want to play around with them a little.

—or showing how a writer's strength can be applied to a writer's weakness:

On the whole, it's apparent that you have very strong command of your words and an ability to express complex matters often quite concisely. However, this commanding tone takes a sharp turn in the paragraph beginning "Traditionally, medicine has taken . . ." What this might make the reader think is that you pulled out a thesaurus for the earlier paragraphs and then got too lazy. I don't think this is the case, but it is possible to see it this way. What you might want to do is keep your tone and language consistent throughout. I find that it makes the piece flow better and is easier to read when you use only one of the two styles you have employed. Overall, though, you have a real solid piece of work that just needs a few minor touch-ups.

In the above example, the tutor also used different points of reference for the standard against which the paper is measured. In one, the tutor ascribes the criticism to a generic audience, "the reader" ("What this might make the reader think is that you pulled out a thesaurus for the earlier paragraphs and then got too lazy") but distances himself from that assessment ("I don't think this is the case") only to re-instate that criticism, using a displaced subject ("but it is possible to see it this way"). The tutor uses "I-language" and direct-address "you," in the same sentence ("I find that it makes the piece flow better and is easier to read when you use only one of the two styles you have employed"). The issue of intentionality aside, the shifting pronouns have the sum effect of shifting agency and responsibility, thereby mitigating a direct hit to the client's ego.

In fact, the generic reader becomes the fall guy in many OWL conferences. Certainly the most fun criticism to read is that couched in humor, although the target of that humor should never be the client. In the three examples below the tutor gently deprecates his own advice; in the third, he also pokes fun at the vagaries of the ever-bothersome generic reader that the writer has to please:

I know it sounds goofy, but it works.

=====

I know that some of these comments seem sort of rambling and in truth, they are: I'm just trying to offer areas where you might continue your investigation of the parallels between these two texts, and possible things to think about in order to tighten up your argument.

=====

So what am I suggesting? okay, this may be pretty unreasonable, but I think you can flesh this story out more, take your time in uncovering the goings on, and make it into a novella or novel even. I think to have a conclusion where the whole species is wiped out, to achieve that sort of closure, you need a longer form, otherwise it feels too easy for the reader: you gotta make 'em suffer before you bring 'em relief, otherwise you mess with their catharsis and no one likes that.

Tutors who want to make sure that the comic intent is clear to the client use emoticons, such as :-) or ;-). The comic intent itself is a way of hedging—as if to say “just joking”—at the same, making a critical point.

Nonetheless, it is important that after the hedging, the shifting pronouns, the humor—after all these strategies for breaking the bad news gently—that the client be told the truth as the tutor honestly sees it, even if the bad news is the client needs, in effect, to start all over:

The problem then is mostly in terms of organization of the content. Your introduction, while giving a sort of nifty metaphor of natural selection as the quality control center of biology, for example doesn't really help us get to what natural selection really IS, how it functions, and so on. I'd also say that how you talk about nat. selec. sounds more like your drawing on a Lamarckian model of evolution (which technically speaking ISN'T nat. selec.), and not a Darwinian, natural selection based model. Your audience, you say, is educated non-biologists (which fits me to a T), and for such people, I think you're going to need to really look at your material and think of the clearest, most concise way of saying what you want to say (because I was confused sometimes, and I've had to wade through more than my fair share of Darwinian theory. I guess I'll show you what I mean specifically in the text:

“I guess I'll show you what I mean specifically in the text:” This last sentence is a typical transition from the front note to the intertextual commentary. Although the client surely could guess that the front note has concluded (even if the tutor had not already told him in the opening of the front note), just as surely he might think that the whole conference is over and not think to scroll down and look within the text for more. More importantly, the transition serves to re-create rhetorically a “live” conference, where tutor and client are actively looking at the text together in real, synchronous time, the tutor pointing to specific instances of the concerns he has mentioned in the front note—a dynamic and dramatic effect created by using present or future tense in the transition sentence that ends the front note and often heightened by ending that sentence with a colon or ellipsis, as in these transitions:

I'll show you what I mean in my intertextual comments, which I suppose I should just move on to now:

===

Alrightee—let’s go ahead and get into your text to take a look at syntax and spelling . . .

===

Anyway, I think I’m being really vague, so I’ll move on to the text, and maybe I’ll start making more sense:

#### A CLOSER LOOK AT INTERTEXTUAL COMMENTARIES

This part of an OWL conference gives tutors a place to point out specific instances of concerns and strengths summarized in the front note. In other words, the intertextual commentary is the follow-through of the front note. Tutors typically compliment and criticize clients’ rhetorical choices, but they also work more closely on sentence-level revision. They will critique sentence structure, suggest alternative word choices, even correct mechanic errors. In effect, the intertextual commentary is a kind of “red-lining,” comparable to an editor’s markings. In an OWL conference, these notations are set off *\*\*\*like this\*\*\**, usually with a line break before and after the comment. Because the tutor is working on so many levels—from global issues identified in the front note to local surface error—this portion of the OWL conference is both visually and rhetorically complex. While conference activities and rationale remain consistent with those of a f2f conference, one striking rhetorical feature of the intertextual commentary is that the criticism becomes markedly more blunt here than in the front note.

#### Local and Global Commentary

Interspersed comments—especially those where the tutor responds reactively to what he has apparently just read—visibly recreate the look of dialogue on a page and experientially capture dialogue’s back-and-forth feel:

>Pullman plays the US president who seems to have no one working  
>under him in this film. He drives to labs, he drives jeeps into the  
> desert, he flies a fighter plane.

*\*\*\*I know! I know they’re strapped for pilots, but give me a break! You don’t get rid of the chain of command like that . . . \*\*\**

Not surprisingly, we see tutors using the same rhetorical strategies in this part of an OWL conference as they do in the front note, again consistent with their own tutoring style and online persona:

*\*\*\*This may be overstating the case. Natural selection acts very very very very very very very very very very slowly, and it’s hard to see its effects as far as change goes (although all the panoply of species out there are its progeny ).\*\*\**

They continue the interpersonal work of the one-to-one conference as well, assuming the effort is a collaborative one and using the peer relationship as a leverage point, still invoking the higher power of the instructor at times:

\*\*\*I'm also dying of curiosity, and I bet your instructor will be, too: what sort of gear? Don't get too technical, but us lay people know nothing about the arcana of sound production, and I'd like to know more.\*\*\*

While the front note lends itself to global comments, intertextuality lends itself to close reading and suggestions for local revisions, in effect, giving tutors the opportunity to point out specific examples of their general remarks. This opportunity, though, becomes especially problematic when commenting on surface error. For some reason, this issue seems to trouble tutors the most, in both f2f and OWL conferencing, both as readers and as tutors. As readers, they tend to notice surface-error interference first and more than any other feature of clients' writing. As tutors, they are torn about how to work with clients at this level of need. On the one hand, they do not want to do all the work and nor are they an editing service; at the same time, they do not want the mistakes to go unremarked and perhaps give clients a false sense of security. Even when the tutor has advised the client in the front note that he is going to have to, in effect, start all over, thereby rendering comments on surface error seemingly irrelevant, instruction can be valuable for future drafts, whether the client revises or not. The most effective method seems to be not unlike that of the f2f conference: identify a pattern of error and then point out several instances of it, perhaps for the first screen or two. With each instance, the tutor perhaps gives less explanation, as if to assume that the client sees the pattern too. Just fixing all the mistakes is not only pedagogically unsound but also impedes readability. When a text is seriously error-ridden, tutors might decline commenting at all, instead insisting that the client come in for a f2f session.

In commenting on surface error, the tutor usually explains the rule in lay language (if he has not already done so in the front note). In the following example, the tutor not only suggests that sentence structure has discipline-specific parameters and stylistic implications, but also shows the client how to write a more active sentence:

\*\*\*I may be off on this one, since I'm not sure how science people feel about passive voice these days (they used to love it). Anyway, this is a passive voice construction, which just means that you've made the subject into an indirect object (or something like that). In short, instead of saying "It was decided," if you wanna make this active, just say WHO decided it, ie "we decided . . ."\*\*\*

Often tutors refer to their own practice or development as writers when they make recommendations and share their own ways—some cognitive, some kinesthetic—of understanding style and sentence structure:

\*\*\*This is one of a few sentences that I found could have been broken into two. After you've made your next set of revisions, read your paper aloud and that will allow you to find many sentences like this one, that almost leave you gasping for air at the end of them. That's when you know you should break them up.\*\*\*

As in a f2f conference, tutors rarely strike a teacherly tone when talking about “rules”—quite the contrary: often they implicitly or explicitly indict the system for being so arbitrary:

\*\*\*Right now, you’ve got what’s known as a comma splice here, which means that you’ve stuck two complete sentences together with a comma. I know, it sounds stupid, but I didn’t make the rules. Anyway, you can fix it by either putting a period there, adding an “and”, or changing the comma for a semi-colon (;) Personally, I like the last option best, but then, I use a lot of semi-colons.\*\*\*

A close reading involves much more than just grammar and mechanics, of course. Meaning can be obscured or obstructed by any number of problems, from choosing the wrong word to using faulty reasoning. What makes this intertextual part of the OWL conference more overwhelming than it is in a f2f conference is that the text becomes shot through with asterisks, which seriously impedes readability. The issue of readability may be more apparent than real—that is, reading interjected remarks is more difficult for non-participants in that conference than it is for either the tutor or the writer. A tutor has to assume that the writer will know his own text more intimately than either the tutor or an outside reader and will care enough to take the effort to decipher the text for the pearls of wisdom that are undoubtedly embedded there.

### Compliment and Critique

The intertextual commentary also gives occasion for compliment, specifically, (seemingly) spontaneously, and so perhaps more powerfully than in the front note. Compliments can serve a number of functions, all of which can advance better writing. A tutor might compliment a particularly fine example of a general writing principle (in the case below, in a personal narrative), reinforcing that principle by overtly stating it:

\*\*\*Great! This sort of detail gets us into the moment in a visceral and moving way.\*\*\*

Ideally, the tutor may find an example from the client’s own text of a revision that the tutor has recommended earlier or generally—

\*\*\*This is a cute bit: the child’s eye view of Wisconsin. You may want to consider other moments where your child’s perspective would be different from that of you as an adult looking back on the events. What are you wearing? What kind of things are you going to pack? What activities are you leaving behind?\*\*\*

Perhaps the most distinguishing rhetorical feature of the intertextual commentary is tutors’ bluntness, often in the guise of humor and sarcasm. This trend in our OWL conferences occurs in all categories of suggestion, although tutors

tend to be more tentative and kind when talking about grammar, and with all clients, except ESL clients, who are generally treated with more deference and less humor. This bluntness may be a function of the tediousness of actually doing an OWL conference: for most tutors, writing is simply more taxing physically and mentally than talking. Or tutors may feel that they need to disambiguate their words in the absence of paralinguistic cues, and they want to make sure clients get the message. But the bluntly critical posture of a tutor's intertextual commentary—in contradistinction to the delicate handling of criticism in the front note—suggests the dialogic character of this part of an OWL conference. Unlike the front note, which derives its genre characteristics and reading expectations from the teacher's end-note on paper texts, the intertextual commentary is not a direct descendent of the teacher's margin notes. In fact, this commentary is not marginal at all because it is not spatially limited by vertical space. Rather, the intertextual commentary is more like a conversation between peers. That the conversation is playful and sometimes contentious is significant, because both speech behaviors are predicated on an assumption of mutual status:

[from a conference on a science-fiction short story featuring killer beetles]

\*\*\*I'm not sure all of this is necessary. I like some of the detail, but it feels like overkill to me, especially since this guy's our first victim. Usually the first victim is akin to the character on Star Trek who I call "Ensign Deadguy." Ensign Deadguy is always the unnamed character who goes with the Away Team to go investigate something with all the main characters. Ensign Deadguy, as his name implies, dies, but not before he/she has a few lines which establish him/her as a human being, even if an un compelling one. This way, the danger of the thing being investigated is established, but we don't kill a character that we have major emotional attachment to. In short, we end up too committed to this guy, and he's beetle fodder.\*\*\*

In the following two examples, taken from the same conference on a psychology paper on baseball cap wearers, the issue of word choice becomes a running joke:

[from client's paper]

>Perhaps they are wearing caps because they missed their showers.

\*\*\*This just might be how I was raised, but I'm not sure if "missed" is the best verb to use with taking a shower. Perhaps, "slept late" or "didn't have enough time (combine it with the grooming part) would be a better choice. Maybe it's just my upbringing. Something to consider though. \*\*\*

[later in the same paper. . .]

>Early morning classes may have more cap wearers since the

>probability is higher that they got up late and missed their shower.

\*\*\*Again, my favorite verb, missed.\*\*\*



Online humor is always a tricky strategy, for it can so easily be misconstrued as sarcasm, which the tutor in the following examples may not have intended—or then again, she may have:

> logic dictates that,

\*\*\*\* Unless you are Spock or something, logic does not dictate anything. It may be a logical case that. . . or it may be that “logic shows that . . . ” but logic does not dictate anything per se. No one is obligated to be logical. . . .

But it is when tutors are taking issue with clients’ arguments that they most often turn contentious, although a humorous posture may disguise aggressive intent. The following excerpt is taken from an OWL conference on a Stephen-King-like short story, and the tutor has taken issue with the client’s imprecise use of language throughout the conference:

> “Well his skin is all cut off,”

\*\*\*Ah, but if the skin alone was cut up, it couldn’t have been a lawnmower (actually it’d be more like the weed-whacker). A lawnmower would leave DEEP incisions in the flesh, into the muscle, and probably even the bone. This kind of flaying would go against their lawnmower hypothesis (and I think that Dan would know that, just by looking at the body on the scene.)\*\*\*

The pointed criticism in the following examples are not couched in humor, however. Clearly, tutors want to make sure that their clients get their point.

> In accordance with this rationale

\*\*\*All you are really saying is “therefore” so why use 5 long words when one will do the same thing?\*\*\*

Even tutors with less playful online personas level criticism more directly here than in the front note, although the comment may run several paragraphs, just as it might in a front note:

\*\*\*My immediate reaction is that you have gone out of your way to overcomplicate your writing. You clearly have a strong command of the language, but I think you overuse your vocabulary, and make things sound awfully complex when the complexity is not necessary. That’s cool, but you will definitely muddy the waters for your argument when you do this.

Take this example from the above paragraph:

“It is the complex concerns associated with so called state and personal paternalism in medicine that this essay will audit.” The term “this essay will audit” is kind of vague. In what way do you intend to “audit” the complex concerns? Are you going to simply enumerate and explain them, or is it your intention to attempt some kind of justification and understanding of the issues as well. Is

your accounting going to trace the roots of this custom? Are you going to explore the multitude of anthropological concerns, that contribute to the culturally biased process by which we determine which individuals are or are not destined to be the subjects of paternalization?

You see . . . the more technical vocabulary you use, the more technical and thorough your argument needs to be. An audit of a subject is considerably more complex and far-reaching than a simple essay on a certain aspect of a single cultural custom. Unless you plan to write a book, I would avoid characterizing your work as an audit. \*\*\*\*

Tutors level criticism this incisively in f2f conferences as well. The rhetorical questions in the example above suggest an oral style. When that style of questioning is transferred to a written medium, the criticism seems more pointed than it does in a f2f conference—or so it would seem to non-participants. Since this strategy is the defining and distinguishable characteristic of intertextual commentary, we might ask how efficacious is this strategy specifically, and by implication, OWL conferencing generally?

Apparently, frank criticism works for some clients, based on the unsolicited thanks, the revised papers, and the repeat customers that our OWL receives. From this cumulative and experiential evidence, we do know that the OWL conference, even a highly critical one, can be effective. The following excerpts are taken from a conference between a female client and a male tutor, a non-traditional student and father of three school-age children:

- > I watch my husband Brad interacting with our son Sean, and I can't
- > imagine how their lives would be without one another. Since birth,
- > Brad has participated a great deal in Sean's care. He feeds, bathes,
- > changes his diapers (even the "messy" ones), and when necessary does
- > an occasional load of laundry. I wouldn't say he goes out of his way
- > to do household chores, but he helps.

\*\*\*It is wonderful to see that Brad "helps" with these chores, but who is he helping? Is it his wife? Does this indicate an assumption about Jesse's role, even by his wife? It wouldn't hurt your essay to recognize your own assumptions about fathers and their roles within the family. Division of labor is about the most gender-loaded issue I can imagine.\*\*\*

\*\*\*\*When Brad's wife does the dishes, does she refer to herself as "helping" Brad? See what I mean about assumptions . . . you say it is equal, but he "helps" which implies that it is someone else's responsibility, and he is lending a hand . . . This kind of helping is NOT an equality based division of labor.\*\*\*

- > Now we're not without conflicts on whether or not the work is
- > divided equally between us, that would be unrealistic. Here is an
- > example: When I get home from a full day of school, (sometimes I go
- > grocery shopping after) I pick Sean up from the babysitter, (which is

- > another 14 miles roundtrip) get home, put away the groceries, fix
- > Sean something to eat, bathe him, read him a story, and settle him in
- > for the night. Brad on the other hand gets off work at 11:30 p.m.
- > arrives home at 11:45 p.m. and doesn't have any household or child
- > care chores to do.

\*\*\*Hmmm . . . I wonder. Does laundry and vacuuming and picking up toys and planning meals and doing dishes and feeding the cat and taking out the trash and sweeping the kitchen and mopping the bathroom and cleaning the toilet and . . . all have to happen between the time you get home from school and the time you go to bed at night? Would it be unreasonable to delegate some of these chores to the night shift? Say after 11:45 pm?\*\*\*\*

- > A study examining why more fathers do not use paternal leave,
- > found that a substantial number of women did not encourage (and
- > even discouraged) their husbands taking paternal leave . . .

\*\*\*\* because they did not want to risk the child's bonding with the father????? Balderdash!!!\*\*\*\*

- > As James Levine, director of the Fatherhood Project at the Families
- > and Work Institute, has said: "Fatherhood is in the midst of an
- > evolution, not a revolution. We shouldn't be discouraged by the
- > accordingly glacial pace of change."

\*\*\*\* Nor should women be willing to accept the claim of equal involvement in the parenting role if the truth does not match the rhetoric. The point you are making seems to be defending the false belief that modern men are changing the face of fatherhood. I think this willingness to accept a glacial pace of change is another example of men using the family structure as a means of maintaining a positive position in the power relationship, and an easier job of it regarding division of domestic labor.

The tutor closes the conference with this end-note:

[I'm] a Father of three in a household where both Father and Mother are full-time students and part-time workers. The value of a full time domestic is fully understood by both of us, and we regularly regret that we cannot afford one!

I enjoyed your essay, and as I said, I expect you will receive a more conventional response from the "official" OWL tutors. I just wanted to point out to you how easily your essay has been allowed to slip into the social mold, and into rationalizations about why Brad's wife somehow ought to be expected to carry a heavier load than Brad. What do these assumptions teach Sean about the husband/wife father /mother relationships?

Thanks for using the OWL, I hope my remarks have been helpful, friendly, and inoffensive. These issues can be pretty highly charged with emotion at times, and it is good that you are able to take a more objective look at things. Also, it is good that you are writing about the one thing you know the most about . . . your self and your life.

Good luck, keep writing!  
—Frank

The next day, the tutor received this response from the female client:

Hi Frank,

Thank you for such a quick response to my paper. I do like writing, but my first paper recieved a poor grade. It kinda took the "wind out of my sails," and I was afraid I couldn't write anything worthwhile. You have renewed my confidence in myself, and your comments are quite helpful. They help me see where some of my weak areas are. Again, thank you.

#### A CLOSER LOOK AT END NOTES

While it would seem that Frank's blunt criticism would destroy any writer's confidence, it had quite the opposite effect on this particular client. Perhaps cushioning the blow was Frank's end note, which reaffirmed their peer connections as non-traditional students and, in this case, as parents. Like the front note, the end note follows a fairly standard form, and often tutors template their own wording, modifying it very little for each client. Some simply sign off, without much more ado, especially if they've already given full-bodied responses before and within the client's text. The end note usually serves other rhetorical functions as well. Tutors frequently include some kind of disclaimer, in part to delimit their authority, should their advice prove different from that of the evaluating TA or professor, but also in larger part, to re-assert clients' agency in taking or leaving tutors' advice. A tutor may even overtly apologize for possibly overwhelming the client with too many suggestions. Or the tutor might nutshell the conference to one or two major points, to make sure an overwhelmed client fails to see the larger issues at stake. A tutor can also encourage revision and further conversation by telling the client that he is welcomed to send in a later version of the paper, closing with a thanks for using our service. Below are examples of end-notes representing this wide range of possibilities for an end note:

I hope I have been helpful, and look forward to seeing a revised version of your essay.

=====

\*\*I guess that's it for now. Feel free to send in a revision, or if you'd like to talk about anything I've just written, I'd love to hear back from you. Bye for now!:-)

=====

\*Okay!:-) That was very interesting to read. Your writing is nice and clear, so you're in pretty good shape there. All you need to do is work on focus—and concentrating on organizing and elucidating the various definitions of religion (I numbered 'em as I came across 'em), and showing the inherent conflicts between them is your best bet. Be sure to be systematic about it, though—right now

things are a little jumbled, like the part about culture/reincarnation. I think that once you've got a clear focus and organized structure, though, that those things'll just naturally smooth out. . . .

=====

Mary - I'm glad you sent in your paper and I really enjoyed reading it.

I made a lot of comments, which I hope don't seem overwhelming. You expressed a lot of good ideas in your paper, so I didn't want to see grammar errors get in your way of getting a good grade and expressing yourself as clearly and as well as possible. If you have any questions, feel free to send them back to the OWL or come into the peer tutoring center in 444 C Angell Hall. We're open 7-11 Sunday-Thursday. Thanks for flying OWL!!!

#### OWL AS SITE OF EMERGENT LITERATE PRACTICES

On the face of it, our OWL is simply an email service based on an "asynchronous, 'epistolary' interaction" (Blythe). This technical model might be viewed as simply promoting a print literacy that places primary value on the production of "papertext," "a technological-epistemological product which locates the writer as a rational, stable subject and presents the text as a coherent, printed totality" (Johnson). While we originally conceived of our OWL as simply adjunctive to our f2f program, it quickly took on a life of its own. The point of divergence between our f2f program and our OWL is, obviously, the method of delivery. An OWL conference is delivered through a network, and that fact fundamentally changes the nature of the client/tutor interaction.<sup>4</sup>

For our OWL conference is not just an interaction between a tutor and a client. OWL tutors are subscribed to a mailgroup,<sup>5</sup> which itself becomes a rich conversation among tutors about writing, about how they and others think and talk about writing. And the OWL mailgroup affords tutors themselves a space to write and be literate in new ways. For the winter term, 1997, for example, the OWL generated over 2000 messages, only about 350 of which were actually client conferences. Tutor trainees were also subscribed to that list, saw the rich interaction of that network of tutors, and in turn, brought those conversations back into our seminars. As OWL tutors now themselves, they are enacting and encouraging new discursive behaviors with their clients and with each other.

Our OWL, then, is not just an online tutorial service, but a site where meaning and value are shared, contested and negotiated, a site that provokes and promotes new literate practices, both online and in print. An OWL conference that a client receives re-presents one end-point of that dynamicism. While an OWL conference is a written artifact, it is an electronic artifact, unstable and ephemeral, shot through with typos, jumbled formatting, and white noise.<sup>6</sup> As an artifact, the OWL conference challenges the ideologies of print and of academic literacy. As a dynamic process, OWL conferencing conflates and reconfigures the pedagogies of the top-down classroom and of the one-to-one conference

alike, enacting a kind of many-to-one pedagogy, a new animal altogether, with a look-and-feel of its own.

#### NOTES

1. While I quote the work of many tutors in this article, I would like to acknowledge and thank three tutors whose work and online personas have profoundly influenced the evolution of our OWL conference pedagogy: Marion Wilderman, Gordon Smith, and Robert Way, otherwise known archetypally in our program as *The Warm*, *The Witty*, and *The Blunt*.
2. All names of both clients and tutors throughout this article are fictitious. This conference, as well as subsequent examples, is cited with permission from the students involved. Here and throughout this article, the caret sign (>) indicates the client's original submission. All comments preceded by \*\*\* indicate the tutor's remarks.
3. All my examples are taken from a single month of conferences in our OWL archive for the winter term, 1997, in an attempt to locate what is normative, but at the same time, to represent a range of tutors' personas and conference styles. Generally, I have not included the clients' writing that tutors are responding to, in part to save space, but in larger part, to focus on the tutors' work. When I cite more than one example of tutors' remarks to show variations, I use a double line ==== to separate those examples.
4. I am echoing Blythe's (1996) words here. Blythe outlines three theories of technology, the second of which is "a substantive approach" which suggests that "technology fundamentally changes the nature of student/tutor interaction."
5. What I describe here basically reflects how we administered our OWL mailgroup from 1994-97, during which time our OWL conference evolved into its current form. As of the winter term, 1997, we changed our subscription policy and mail-handling procedures. Only two faculty advisors and two student "dispatchers" belong to the OWL mailgroup. The two experienced cybertutors dispatch the mail, assigning and forwarding each request to a specific tutor on duty for the evening. When a tutor sends his response (the "conference") to the client, he also sends a copy back through owl@umich.edu, and the two dispatchers know that the client has been taken care of. If the client has given permission to use her conference for training purposes, a dispatcher removes the client's and tutor's names and addresses and forwards that conference on to the mailgroup for tutor-trainees. This new administrative policy is not just a matter of efficiency but also of ethics: tutors were concerned that clients may not be aware that their submissions to OWL were going to a mailgroup and were therefore public. We now ask clients' permission on our mailform to retransmit their work anonymously for training purposes. About 50% grant that permission. Our Web mailform page also lets clients know that OWL is a mailgroup and therefore an OWL conference cannot give them the confidentiality of a f2f conference.
6. I have editorially "cleaned up" all the examples in this article for the sake of readability.