

"The Values of Reading, Writing, and of a Writing Center in an English as a Foreign Language Setting"

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I've always been a word person. I had a creative elementary school teacher who had a project board called "The Aviary." Each week she would give us an interesting word combination. We would look up the words in the dictionary and then draw a colorful picture of what the word described. An "acephalous albino biped" would become a picture of a ghostly white creature who walked upright on two legs, and had a shrunken head. A "zaftig nymph," and I would draw a picture of a young sylvan woman with a full rounded figure dancing through meadows and forests. Perhaps imaginative experiences like this started me on the path of taking a particular interest in word combinations, which eventually resulted in me getting a doctorate in English literature. Along the way I did a lot of reading and progressed in my appreciation of word play: What makes a successful sentence? How can a subject be communicated vividly to a reader? What is the value of writing? What is the value of reading writing? Why do societies or should societies emphasize literacy? In the EFL setting, how can reading and writing in the foreign language facilitate language acquisition?

The emphasis upon literacy is actually under siege in our increasingly technological world. In the United States the emphasis upon reading and writing is still strong, but time spent reading is having to compete with more easily acquired, easily digested forms of gathering information and entertainment--chiefly television and movies--and increasingly teachers are lamenting a severe decline in their students' ability with written communication. Sven Birkerts, a writing instructor at Harvard, made a troubling observation about his students in a 1988 edition of *Harvard Magazine* entitled, "What, Me Read?" He found in talking with his students about the books they enjoyed reading that they didn't generally find time to read, and when they did read, they read books that weren't very challenging. He also wrote that over the decades he has been teaching, he has observed a steady decline in his students' abilities to write in a vivid, engaging way. He found his students' writing styles to be flat, unimaginative. They showed little understanding of the versatility of the language and how to engage dynamically with the writing challenge. He traced a correlation between reading the language, learning to appreciate beautifully expressed written ideas, and knowing how to develop vividly one's own writing projects.

Reading and writing are crucial interrelated skills. These skills are necessary to be a fully functioning member of the English speaking community, where written communication is a dominant form of interaction both professionally and socially. Particularly in the EFL setting, if students are to master the target language, their training must include the ability to read in the language, and to write in the language. EFL training that focuses primarily on speaking is not adequate and will not assist the students to enter into the English speaking world in more significant ways. Such limited training limits the person to a more marginalized existence within the English speaking community. On a more in

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depth level, reading and writing the language improves the person's appreciation of the language's subtle beauty. The language's profound thought, inquiry, and artistic expression are most effectively experienced through careful written communication.

Why read?

I endeavor to teach my students the value of reading. They frequently flare up defensively about it and challenge the importance of reading. Like so many things, if they don't have personal experience of the value of it, they won't understand its importance. What I try to teach them is that reading challenging, beautifully expressed ideas, whether through novels, poetry, or in essays and articles, broadens one's perspective of the world. It's a way to get contemplatively inside of another person's perspective and outside of your own individual perspective, to increase the ways through which to view an issue and arrive at a state of mind that dwells in realms of greater complexity. F. Scott Fitzgerald writes that the test of a first-rate intelligence is the "ability to hold two opposed ideas in the head at the same time and still retain the ability to function." Reading increases a person's cognitive power, adds thought and substance, pushes a person to think on a deeper level, to question, to ponder, and all of this adds to the quality of one's life.

For example, in my reading of literature, I experience an author's profound thoughts, frequently about a different country, a different century. A whole world of experience opens up for me as I open a book, and my own world becomes that much richer, that much broader. Even day-to-day experience is frequently made more enjoyable through the many associations that I have built up through my reading. For example, the poem "To Butter a Bagel" by Alma Denny, goes like this:

To butter a bagel
 You need to finagle
 Just to inveigle
 The slithering spread
 To the edge of the bread,
 Avoiding the hole
 Of this crisp Jewish roll
 Lest globs of goo land
 in the palm of your hand.

If you want to add extras
 You'd better be dexterous
 And nab the stray blocks
 Of cream cheese and lox
 That fall through the middle
 Of this no-middle vittle.

This isn't a poem of great profundity, and yet I realize that after reading this poem my experience of eating a bagel will never be the same, because these associations from this delightful poem will augment my level of enjoyment of this otherwise rather mundane activity.

The relationship of reading to writing is this: when one appreciates beautiful pieces of writing, it increases the repertoire of words, sentence structures, associations that one can bring to one's own writing. Moreover, in EFL language acquisition the study of a thought provoking text provides

numerous opportunities to implement not only writing exercises, but also reading, listening, and speaking exercises. For example, the poem "The Weary Blues" by Langston Hughes describes Hughes's experience in Harlem listening to a Blues' player. Many useful and fascinating EFL activities arise in interacting with a poem that can be easily adapted to the level of the class. First, the study of a poem is a memorable way to learn new vocabulary words, on both the denotative and connotative levels.

Second, poems provide excellent reading and listening comprehension exercises. There are two characters in "The Weary Blues", the poet who describes his experience of observing the Blues' player, and the Blues' player whose song is recorded in the poem. The two men, although they both are the same race and live in Harlem, have very different styles of speech. An effective comprehension activity is to choose two students, one to read the words of the poet, and the other to read the words of the song of the Blues' man. The class can then explore the different syntax of the two men and why the two men speak differently, speculating on their different backgrounds. (For example, Hughes was a well-educated writer who spoke three languages and had traveled extensively). Such a discussion helps to undo the idea that all American black people speak alike, teaching that one's speech patterns depend on one's cultural experience. This poem also provides an opportunity to explore Black English and how it differs from Standard American English (Fromkin 287-91). The teacher can discuss with the class why different ethnic cultures within a nation have different speech patterns. Is it a way to express their sense of difference from the mainstream culture, for example? (Murray 144) The teacher may also explore at this point the different dialects that exist in the students' native culture. Role playing is a wonderful way to allow the students to enter into the minds of the characters they are examining. After dramatizing the poem, the two readers can pretend they are the characters, and the class can ask them questions about their lives, extrapolating from the material of the poem. The poem also enables the class to explore the experience of the black community through the rich Blues' musical tradition. Playing a Blues' song, such as "Trouble in Mind", with the words of the song written out for them to follow, or with most of the words written out with some blanks for the class to fill in, is another effective and enjoyable listening comprehension activity.

Third, writing exercises evolving from the study of the poem are various. To facilitate understanding of the Blues' player's syntax: "I got the Weary Blues / And I can't be satisfied . . . / I's gwine to quit ma frownin' / And put ma troubles on the shelf", it's useful to have the students write out in Standard English what the Blues' man is saying. Another writing exercise could be to make a written description of the Blues' player, who is vividly experienced in the poem. What is he wearing, what sort of expression is on his face? An additional writing exercise might be to have the students imagine that the poet approaches the Blues' player and the two men speak. The students can write out, either individually or in pairs, a page of dialogue that might occur between these two men. The study of a beautiful piece of writing, such as a poem, is a provocative and profound context for the study and practice of the target language.

Why write?

I remember reading in Jean Auel's novel *The Clan of the Cave Bear*, about prehistoric man, how young, female Ayla wandered into a meeting of the clan elders where the clan's memories were shared by all those present with the help of a specially prepared drink and through the channeling ability of Creb, the medicine man and keeper of the clan legends. Ayla experiences the memories that were only supposed to be shared among the men, and she reports that she felt her brain was being reformed, certain connections forged and channels widened, shaped. It was a painful experience, but afterwards she had amplified abilities that enabled her to take a position of greater authority within the clan.

To me, this excerpt describes what occurs as one pushes oneself to write. I'm often astonished as I move through multiple revisions of a paper, at the transition from draft to draft of my original idea. It gradually transforms into an increasingly significant expression, and I recognize in the process of writing a depth of insight that I was oblivious to before attempting to put my thoughts down on paper. I tell my students that writing is like combing through tangled hair. It helps to arrange your jumbled, tangled thoughts and place them in order. Often I find that I'm not even sure what I think about an issue until I put pen to paper and start forming sentences around my chaotic thoughts.

I've moved through numerous stages in my writing process. From the personal uninhibited creative evocations of elementary school years, to the more self-conscious high school, hurried night before the paper was due writing experience, to the college level where I was expected to write in a more methodical way. At the college level I worked in my university's writing center. It was a formative experience for me. It enabled me to see numerous essays and to develop the ability to determine quickly what made for a good paper and how to help others to master the principles of focus and organization and expression that contributed to effective writing. This experience developed my writing immensely, but I was also lulled in the writing center into a false sense of my writing talent.

From there I went on to graduate school and faced the terror of the twenty-five page research paper on such daunting topics as "Wordsworth's Ponderous 'I' Persona." In graduate school I froze on many writing assignments. It just didn't seem I had the analytical tools necessary to formulate the type of writing product I needed to in order to deal effectively with very difficult concepts. A wise graduate professor told me that there are multiple levels of writing ability, and that often one plateaus for a long period of time, and finally pushes herself off the plateau and begins moving through the awkward in-between level stage when one has difficulty forming sentences at all. You recognize the inadequacy of your former writing and analytical ability, but you don't yet have the next level's skill to reach higher in written expression. It feels during these periods that you are just spinning your wheels, but if you keep trying, eventually you'll punch through and arrive at the next level.

This piece of advice helped me a lot, and I found that it was very true, especially as I moved through my doctoral dissertation ordeal, which was truly excruciating. No project is likely to fill you with such a sense of inadequacy. Fortunately I was blessed with an uncommon amount of persistence, or stubbornness, in finishing tasks, and so I kept at it, day after day, year after year, until I was done. I managed not to join the ranks of the ABDs (All But Dissertation), who for one reason or another chose not to leap over that long last hurdle. I wasn't extremely pleased with my dissertation, but I did succeed in putting each chapter through probably around fifty drafts, and moving to increasingly significant levels of thought and analysis. The multiple draft exercise is a remarkable one. It describes the ability to write your ideas once in the best way possible, and then to go back to this piece of writing and completely rethink it, reorganize it. It moves the writing project up a stairway of increasingly effective expression. It's an intellectual exercise that makes for supple thought processes, just like deep muscle exercises make for a supple body.

While going through graduate school I taught a number of writing courses and literature courses, and have probably by this time reviewed, counseled, and graded essays in the thousands. I've received numerous deplorably written essays, numerous essays that had a promising idea that never adequately emerged. Almost always the essays needed to go through additional drafts in order to clarify the focus and organization. Teachers try, frequently in vain, to convince students to take more time with their

writing projects and put them through multiple drafts, but students are reluctant. It's hard to do this. It's hard to understand the necessity. I remember when I was at their level of study, I didn't do it either. I recall one occasion when I stayed up all night writing my research paper on *Huckleberry Finn*, missed the morning class where I had to hand it in, and finally made it to my teacher's office after the class was over, handed him the paper, and explained with a grin that I had been up all night writing it. He didn't say a word to me, just looked at me hard, took the paper, and closed the door in my face. I got the message. My performance was beneath consideration. It's hard being a teacher. Now as a teacher I look at my students with some indulgence, knowing that I was just as they are.

Writing Centers of my past

As I've moved from school to school, writing centers have been an important part of each of the English departments where I've taught. At DePaul University in Chicago, the orientation at the beginning of each school year included a presentation to all the writing teachers of the services of the writing center. The first weeks of classes each teacher took their students to visit the center and be introduced to the services there.

My original experience as a writing center tutor is the foundation of writing centers generally. Student tutors who have exceptional writing skills and are interested in the writing challenge, work in the center and await the students that come to the center with a draft of their writing projects. The tutor sits down with the student and reads through the draft, and then the two of them talk about how the focus can be improved, what the thesis statement is, what are the main ideas in support of the thesis, what are the basic principles of organization of an essay, what are the techniques that one can use to move one's writing from the general to the specific, the mundane to the vivid.

The important dynamic is the one-on-one interaction between writer and reader. A writer writes to a reader. The center gives the writer the chance to meet a sample reader and understand how well his or her writing is achieving its objective to communicate effectively in writing. The reader helps the writer to know what isn't clear, where further details or evidence or examples are needed to lend more support to a thesis. It is crucial to have a reader look over one's writing in order to understand where there are gaps in coherence. The writer is frequently unaware of the areas in his or her writing project that aren't making sense. The writer is too close to the writing and needs for an objective, fresh eye to point out problem areas and make suggestions for ways to express and organize the writing project more effectively.

In my experience teaching at Columbia College in Chicago, I was especially impressed by their very organized approach to the writing center. The writing teacher locates within the first two weeks of class, after reviewing the classes first writing project, the students who need special attention with their writing skills. These students are assigned a writing center tutor with whom they meet each week. The tutor keeps in touch with the teacher, sending weekly progress forms regarding the writing assignment that the student is working on. In this way a student receives continuous support and has the continuity of working with one person who can trace his or her writing progress.

Mexico

When I arrived in Mexico and searched for teaching positions, I noticed that the universities had heavily technological bent to their training. I learned that the study of English literature is rarely even part of the curriculum. I also found that writing assignments and writing skills were not as emphasized in the curriculum as the ability to take exams. This surprised me, knowing that the ability to write is

certainly a more valuable skill. Particularly in foreign language acquisition, an essential part of effectively learning the language involves reading and writing the language. Reading increases one's understanding of and versatility with the language. And writing enables the student to arrive at a more accurate understanding of the workings of the language. In speaking the language a person stays on a much more superficial level. Spoken communication is this way. It is also difficult to know when speaking that one is committing such errors as shifts in tense, subject/verb agreement, and other common usage elements. In writing, these errors can be isolated and pointed out to the students.

Traditionally writing has been ranked among the four major objectives of language acquisition: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. However, in teaching practice emphasis falls on oral communication (listening and speaking the language), rather than on written communication (reading and writing the language). This is unfortunate, since reading and writing exercises provide students with a more in depth engagement with the target language, and reading and writing skills are crucial to their success in the language. Fortunately, the value of the teaching of written communication is gaining importance in the EFL setting. Such seminal EFL texts as Celce-Murcia's *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language*, dedicates one section to the teaching of writing and another section to reading practice. The collection of essays on writing describes writing tasks adapted to the varying skill levels of the students. Jan Frodesen explores the range of writing assignments, from more guided writing tasks which focus on grammar skills, to the more complex writing challenges for more advanced students focusing on sentence combining and text analysis. These essays observe that writing is a vital communicative skill which provides the learner with the opportunity to delve more deeply into the communication process. The learner has the chance in writing to rethink ideas and "focus on both linguistic accuracy and content organization" (Olshtain 241). It is my hope that reading and writing instruction will form a more substantial part of foreign language acquisition.

The Tec de Monterrey Writing Center

When I began teaching at the Tec de Monterrey, Mexico City campus, I was pleased to find a vigorous English department that did include much study of literature and placed a great deal of emphasis on writing skills. My teaching experience there has been very positive. The teaching load is very heavy, however, and I found in my writing courses that it was an impossible task to give the many students the kind of intensive writing instruction they needed. The particular challenges my students faced in mastering English as a Foreign Language made for especially complicated writing instruction and grammar correction. I found myself feeling frustrated as I felt that I wasn't adequately addressing their writing needs.

And so, I got the idea of starting up a writing center at the Tec. I felt it was a service that was vitally needed, not just within the English department, but for all of the departments, many of which gave writing assignments in English. I wrote out a proposal, and it was accepted.

How is the center organized? Each term, I visit the highest level English classes and present the possibility to the students that they may work in the center. I ask them if they like to write, if they feel that they have special skill in this. And I invite them to visit me in my office. Those who are interested come by. I talk with them about their desire to work in the center, and then they take an examination. The examination is in three parts. The first section tests their grammatical skills. The second section asks them to write an essay with special attention to the presence of a thesis and to the organization of ideas in support of the thesis. The final section asks them to read a sample essay, correct it, and write about the approach they would use in helping the student to revise the essay successfully. Most

important, I ask them to bring me a writing sample that they have written in the past that they are especially proud of.

I choose the writing center tutors based on two criteria: 1) how fluent they are and how well they write in the target language. I can easily ascertain this just from reading a few paragraphs of their writing. 2) how responsible and serious-minded they are. You want people in the center who know how to use their time well. There are many hours when they are sitting in the center and no student comes by, and I stress that during this time I expect them to prepare themselves to help the students when they do come. In the center there are many manuals on writing, dictionaries, handbooks, work sheets on different grammatical issues, as well as a few literary anthologies, and news magazines. All of the tutors have a great deal to learn in teaching writing and improving their English skills, and I expect them to devote their free time in the center to this.

After choosing the tutors I put them through an intensive week of orientation. We address what makes a strong piece of writing, common grammatical errors, how to read and revise essays. We do a lot of tutor/tutee role playing. We go over several sample essays, and we discuss what the approach should be in advising the student. Of course, the most valuable orientation comes from on-the-job training, as the tutor sits beside the student and actually reads and talks with the student about the writing process. Surely the tutor learns the most about writing, in the process of teaching the student how to write. The writing center experience helps advanced students to progress further in the target language than they would ordinarily in a regular classroom setting. Teaching is the best form of learning. Each tutor sees numerous essays, and the practice of going through essay after essay cumulatively helps the tutor improve his or her English skills and recognize what works in writing and what doesn't.

Each week I give my tutors a writing assignment to complete. Frequently it is an assignment to write a paragraph, on the theory that if a person knows how to write a paragraph, he or she will also know how to write a strong essay. The paragraph has the same elements: topic sentence corresponding to thesis statement in the essay, supporting sentences corresponding to supporting paragraphs in an essay, and concluding sentence corresponding to the essay's conclusion. One week they will research description skills in order to write a descriptive paragraph. The next week it may be a comparison paragraph, the next week an expository paragraph, etc. This term I'm having my tutors write a manual about working in the writing center that the writing center tutors will be able to use in subsequent terms.

How are the tutors compensated? While occasionally a student may be interested in volunteering, this isn't the most reliable form of staffing a writing center. When I was a tutor back when I was an undergraduate, I was paid for my services. I worked in the center twenty hours a week while also going to school. At the Tec, it was decided that it wasn't possible to pay the students, so we worked out other forms of compensation. A few of my tutors are on scholarships, and working in the center is their form of paying for their schooling. Primarily, the tutors who work in the center work for class credit. I grade their performance just as though they are taking a class from me. Their grade consists of their attendance and performance in the center and the writing assignments that they hand in.

Finding a space for the center. This was difficult. Ideally it's good to have space that is nearby or part of the English department. This is helpful for the person who is supervising the center in particular, because it's easier to keep an eye on how things are going, to take attendance, and to be sure that the climate of the center is a constructive one. Our center presently isn't located anywhere near the

English department. It's set off in a far corner of the campus in a stuffy room that has no ventilation. It is extremely hot in the summer and extremely cold in the winter. It's the space where there is also an art class one day a week, so there is a lot of dramatic, amateur art along the walls, and on the shelves, paintings, ceramics, even some noodle art made with different shapes of pasta, etc. I like this aspect. I think it makes for a creative environment in which to write. Still, the fact that the center is located a walk from where my office is presents a problem in supervising. I've solved this problem by choosing one tutor each hour to take attendance and write a brief comment about what each tutor did during the hour. I try to be in the center as much as I can, but I can't be there all the time, particularly when I am teaching. I've found that some tutors are very dependable and can handle this responsibility in my absence.

Center Hours: The center is presently open Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday from 12-4. Ideally it would be better that it be open more hours, but since this is just the second term, we're still in the initial organizational stages. My tutors each work in the center five hours a week, just as they would in attending a class. Four to five tutors are assigned each hour that the center is open. Some tutors are responsible for publicity. They visit each of the classes that gives writing assignments in English and explain about the existence of the writing center and how it works.

How does the center work? The student brings in a draft of his/her work. A tutor introduces him or herself, asks the student to sit down, and asks the student about the assignment. The tutor then reads over the draft, and they talk about it. The emphasis is on teaching the writer to write the assignment more effectively. I stress to my tutors that they need to always involve the student in what they are doing. They do not do the work for the student. The challenge is to talk with the student and help the student to get a clearer idea of what he or she is trying to say and how to say it better. Occasionally a student will stop by with the idea that they will just leave their paper and return later to find it has been magically transformed. The tutor quickly disabuses the student of this perception. Frequently the essays the students bring in require extensive help. I instruct my tutors to focus in on the one or two most pressing problems. For example, if the paper has no focus, the counseling session works on clarifying the focus and developing an outline to support the focus. The tutors first address the presence and strength of the thesis, and assist the students in their understanding of basic paragraph structure in support of the thesis. If the paper is strong in these areas, at what I call the *macro revision* level, the tutor can devote the counseling session to *stylistic* aspects, or the *micro revision* level (Heath 200).

The students frequently have difficulty finding the time to go to the center. Their schedules are usually too demanding. In my classes I make it obligatory that the students either come talk to me about their paper while it is in progress, or visit the center. They bring a draft of their work to the center, and after going over the paper, the tutor fills out a writing center visit form which he or she gives to the student. The student hands this form in with the final draft and previous drafts of the paper to verify that they did visit the center. In grading the paper I look at the previous drafts, and I increase the score on the paper if I can see that a substantial revision of the student's ideas has taken place.

The writing center is an immense help with my classes. It is very satisfying to know my students are learning that writing is a more involved process than they had previously thought. I know that it's crucial to have a trained reader review one's writing in order to write an effective paper. I'm glad to know my students are learning this. Their writing projects improve significantly as a result of the existence of the writing center. As a teacher committed to reading and writing, this is a great compensation to me. Moreover, the writing center greatly enhances the skills of the tutors. In the recent

publication, *Writing Centers: An Annotated Bibliography*--a fascinating reference book on the history and practice of writing centers--the authors observe that "writing centers have been one of the most significant educational innovations of this century," transforming the method of writing instruction by actively involving students in the teaching and learning processes of writing (Hafernik 172). The attached appendix cites the observations of the students involved in the writing center. It documents their perceptions of the value of this learning experience in improving their own language skills. The desire to gain fluency in English, today's Lingua Franca, is strong. Responsible teaching must aid students to gain greater language proficiency through reading and writing instruction. Writing Centers are a valuable resource in facilitating this process.

(Appendix)

Comments from tutors and tutees on the value of the Writing Center:

Claudia Guerrero Negrete (Tutor):

Value of the Center: "The writing center helps the tutors and students improve their writing skills. It offers the students the opportunity to learn how to express their ideas more effectively with the guidance of a fellow student in a relaxed and comfortable environment. The students accept the suggestions and corrections made by a tutor more easily because there is a stronger feeling of empathy between student-tutor than between student-teacher, in most cases."

What I've learned: "The experience of being a tutor at the writing center has encouraged me to improve my own writing skills to be able to help other students. I prepare myself continuously in topics such as thesis statement, topic sentences, essays and various types of paragraphs, and I've noticed that after six months of tutoring the way I express my ideas has improved significantly."

What the tutoring experience is like: "I find it very interesting to read the different ideas of so many students. It is fascinating to witness the different approaches of each paper to the same topic or situations. It is also very rewarding to receive the students' gratitude when they leave. Their smiles, and "Thank yous" are the best reward I can receive. And I feel very satisfied with my work when they return to me with their next essay."

How it works: "The student comes with his draft and I read it quickly. I try to identify the thesis statement and whether it is a good one. If it isn't, I try to arrive at an effective one with the student. If the ideas of the student are expressed clearly and effectively, I go to the micro revision level (grammar, sentence structure, etc.); and if not, I work with the student on an outline to try to define exactly what the student wants to say and how to express it. If possible, the student comes with a second draft and then we try to finish it."

Paula Cruces (Tutor):

What the tutoring experience is like: "I think it's a great experience. You have to force yourself to be better each day, to know more about what and how to correct. It is great when a student says 'Thank you very much' and he really likes what you both worked on, and when they tell you they are coming back to see you. Being a tutor is nothing like being a student or a teacher. It's a whole different and helpful experience."

Mauricio Rubio: (Tutor):

"The Center is a great opportunity to help people with their writing skills, but I think it has helped me as well. I've learned new ways and methods of writing. I've also discovered new kinds of essays and paragraphs I wasn't aware of. It's wonderful to help the students with their work, because you can teach them new ways of organizing their ideas and expressing their thoughts. It's been rewarding working at the Center, and I look forward to learn more and have new experiences for as long

as I stay there."

Ivan Cano (Tutee):

"The tutors at the center take their role at the center seriously and responsibly. They help me a lot with the essay, and they do not change any of our ideas, just help us put them in order and clarify. I liked the way the tutor read the paper and then asked me what I wanted to say or explain, and then we both corrected the essay."

Jorge Gerson Garcia (Tutee):

"The corrections were helpful, and I think that it helps you to have a good idea of organization and make your ideas clearer."

Maria Jose Guzman (Tutee):

Alejandra helped me a lot to improve my thesis statement, to organize my ideas in each paragraph, and some tips for quotes and paraphrasing."

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