

Strategies for Challenging Dominant Discourse and Ideas in the Writing Center

The following strategies are adapted from various readings, including *The Bedford Guide*, Suhr-Sytsma and Brown, and others. We look forward to expanding this handout together as a Writing Center staff.

1. **Clarify meanings together.** Ask, “What do you mean?” “What are you trying to say here?” or “Why do you say this?” This enables writers to take charge of their own reflections on their writing and what they want to convey.
2. **Express understanding of one another’s meanings. Address language without accusations of intentional oppression. Be courteous, no matter how difficult it may be. Maintain a positive, collaborative tone.** Our attitude often sets the tone for the whole consultation. If we are courteous and directive, our consultee is more likely to show us the same level of courtesy. Asking students about their lives beyond their writing and creating a nonjudgmental atmosphere of trust is especially key in fostering productive conversations about dominant discourse. In the process, we also model and engage in respectful dialogue.
3. **Point out non-inclusive language in a respectful, directive manner.** When the writer expresses ideas or speaks language that is marginalizing in any way—whether intentionally or unintentionally—confront the writer about it.
4. **Show the writer what alternatives are available to them.** We can provide the writer with options and model for the writer how to use alternative language.
5. **Discuss meaning and use of sources.** When writers do not distinguish their own perspectives from those of their sources, consultants generally ask writers to “step back” and orally describe the content of their sources. In a similar vein, when writers are confused about the meaning of sources, consultants sometimes ask writers to review their notes on their sources or the sources themselves. We can also encourage the writer to examine assumptions in sources that they cite and analyze in their writing projects.
6. **Respond as a reader. Prompt the writer to consider the rhetorical situation.** Help the writer to imagine the response of their audience to their writing. Rebekah says, “I gently offer ways that the student can articulate their argument in a more constructive way. I let them know that they need to consider their audience, and that their ideas might possibly alienate certain individuals of certain beliefs and identities.”
7. **Encourage the writer to rethink assumptions about what is normal, natural, proper, expected, and valued.** In the text that the writer shares with us and the conversation that we have with them about the text, there are opportunities to examine more carefully the assumptions that underlie their thinking. In our role as consultant, we identify those opportunities and guide the writer in their examination.

8. **Pose counterarguments.** One option is to raise a hypothetical argument that a potential reader might make. Another option is draw from our own subject positions as readers. For instance, one consultant explained to a writer how she would find fault with part of his argument “as a woman.”
9. **Reflect on our own language, ideas, assumptions, and practices, including ways of relating to and interacting with the writer.** Like the writer, we as consultants must be ready to rethink our assumptions about what is normal, natural, proper, expected, and valued. This is especially important when we are in a place of privilege relative to the writer. It can be uncomfortable and challenge our perceptions of ourselves, but we do it alongside the writer.
10. **Create space for the marginalized writer to speak and exist. Listen with the intent to receive their experiences, language, and identity.** As consultants, we not only guide the writer toward critical awareness; we allow the writer to guide us as well. We “listen with the intent to receive” (Ratcliffe 2009). When we feel unsettled or uncomfortable, we are even more mindful of taking a posture of openness and empathy toward the writer, to be with them, on their side, in the moment of conversation that we have with them.