

# TUTOR AGENCY VS OFFENSIVE CONTENT

## MADISON TAGGART

### Introduction

There is a broad range of words and subjects that may be considered offensive. The most blatant can be racist terminology and stereotypes, but it is more likely to run into **offensive ideas that are woven into writing**. Tutors are often reluctant to mention offensive language when it appears, which is a detriment of the student and the tutor. There is interest in being antiracist, otherwise practicing varying forms of racism, and being culturally aware. However, there is ignorance on how to best be antiracist and culturally aware, and how to address offensive content, especially by newer tutors.

### What Might Offensive Content Look Like?

- **Homogenization** = Avoiding, or ignoring, differences in demographics. (Eg. Assuming that all actors in Hollywood are white.)
- **Stereotypes** = Broad generalizations applied to large groups of people, which may be used as evidence or truth. (Eg. Assuming all women are more emotionally fragile while all men should not show emotion.)
- **Exoticizing**=focus on extreme differences, viewing different groups as “others” (Eg. Viewing a culture as alien and not “normal”)

### Why Is It Hard to Talk About Offensive Content?

- Fear of offending the student.
- Lack of confidence in one’s own knowledge on controversial subjects (ex. racism, sexism).
- Concerns over censorship of the student.
- Assumed taboo of discussing offensive content.
- Personal discomfort of discussing offensive content.

Someone comes in with a paper containing offensive content.

What do you do?

Mention the language to the student

Ignore it and go on with the session

- **Ask for the student’s reasoning** for their inclusion of said idea.
- **Consider personal biases** from student and tutor.
- **Begin a conversation** as to why the content is “offensive”.

- **Can create an uncomfortable environment** for yourself.
- **Student remains unaware of the potential harm** of their writing.
- **Student may not receive all the writing help they need.**

- **Can incentivize the student to consider new ideas** they may not have had before
- **Gives an opportunity to provoke talk about difficult topics.**

- **Normalizes potentially harmful ideas and language** for the student.
- **Student’s writing is limited and may be penalized** by professors for apparent lack of critical thought.

### Tutor Power

Tutors, and the Writing Center as a whole, uniquely sit in an intersection of academics and social dynamics. Tutors have the ability to change the power held at a small level, while the Writing Center can encourage larger scale changes in power that can lead to systematic change. Viewing agency in the writing center can be broken down into four essential aspects: 1) students have a “degree of control” when developing as writers, 2) students must notice if an action to enact change must be taken in context, 3) students must understand the potential consequences of a number of actions, and 4) writing instructors and program advisors must create “optimal conditions” to help develop student awareness of actions.

### Strategies for Tutors

- Self-reflect on their relations to controversial issues like systemic racism.
- Be clear and direct, and break down tough subjects to help the student understand why a word or idea may be offensive.
- Take time inside and outside the writing center to discuss tough subjects.

### Strategies for the Writing Center

- Create a safe environment for healthy, productive discussions on controversial topics.
- Host regular discussions to educate tutors and faculty on how to address offensive content.
- Provide support and, if needed, give tutors mental breaks if they are stressed.
- Evaluate the position of the writing center as a safe space and a institution regularly.