

# Hinting at What They Mean: Indirect Suggestions in Writing Tutors' Interactions With Engineering Students

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**Abstract**—This study examines the frequency with which 12 writing tutors used hints in their suggestions to 12 engineering students in 13 interactions about technical writing. Of the 424 suggestions tutors made, 106 were hints. Using Weizman's model as a guide, the study describes three types of hints that tutors used: evaluations, general rules, and elisions. It also investigates the benefits that tutors receive from using those types of hints and examines the problems for students that can arise when tutors state their suggestions as hints. Combined with previous research findings, the findings of this study suggest that tutors should pair mildly negative evaluations and general rules with direct suggestions, and tutors should avoid strongly negative evaluations, i.e., criticisms. The findings also suggest that tutors can elide suggestions and provide words and phrases for students' documents but that they should only do this occasionally to model effective tone or syntax.

**Index Terms**—Engineering students, hints, politeness, technical writing, tutoring.

## MAKING SUGGESTIONS TO ENGINEERING STUDENTS

One important element of writing tutors' work is conveying to student writers how they can revise their writing in order to improve it. Clearly conveying how student writers can improve their writing is also important in the interactions that involve writing tutors and engineering students. In universities and colleges, engineering students seek feedback on technical writing genres such as project evaluations, proposals, technical descriptions, and technical abstracts. However, the task of clearly conveying suggestions about how to improve writing is potentially a tricky one, given that tutors also want to build students' confidence in themselves as technical writers and to promote their independent decision-making about their writing. Interviewed after a tutoring session, one tutor put it this way:

David: *Nobody wants to be tutored by someone who might be condescending and judgmental of their work. Tutoring is a balancing act.*

To carry out this balancing act, writing tutors working with engineering students must be aware of the language they use to convey necessary changes to writers' documents. Like technical editors working with subject-matter experts, writing tutors must be mindful that, in making suggestions, they insert themselves into the writer's composing process and, consequently, may make writers defensive

about changing their writing. That tutors need to be cognizant of the language they use to carry out their job is true even though students often seek help voluntarily, without coercion from their instructors.

In addition, writing tutors must take into account that engineering students' confidence in themselves as writers may be shaky. Engineering students who participated in this study made comments like the ones below:

Sherry: *I do not like writing papers. ... I would rather go and do an engineer problem, or a math problem, or a physics problem.*

Joe: *I think I've learned not to like it [writing]. ... I've never really done good in any of my writing classes. ... I'll write something and I'll think it looks good. And I'll look it over before I'll hand it in. Then I'll hand it in and it-it- it won't meet their standards. (Laughs).*

In addition to lacking confidence in themselves as writers, students may also lack familiarity with conventions and genres of technical writing and in the subject matter of their writing. That is, writing tutors encounter engineering students who are new to their writing courses, new to the genre they are working in, and potentially new to the subject matter they have chosen to research.

Writing tutors face a dilemma: They must make suggestions, but they must also maintain students' confidence and promote their independence as writers. In other words, tutors must balance **making clear suggestions** with **being polite**. As both this study and casual observation show, however, tutors at times eschew clarity, stating their suggestions as HINTS. For example, a tutor who wants to suggest that a student add a table might say *Tables help*

Manuscript received November 8, 2004;  
revised February 3, 2005.

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IEEE DOI 10.1109/TPC.2005.859727

readers comprehend large data sets rather than saying something more clear, like *Include a table in this section*. In this study, I examine the frequency with which writing tutors stated their suggestions to engineering students as hints, or in more technical terms, with NONCONVENTIONAL INDIRECTNESS. More importantly, I examine the benefits that tutors receive from using hints. I also examine the problems for students that can arise when tutors state their suggestions as hints. Based on this analysis and on prior research, I recommend some ways to augment hints or avoid them altogether in order to decrease chances of miscommunication and to provide individualized feedback.

## MAKING SUGGESTIONS WITH VARYING DEGREES OF DIRECTNESS

**Direct Suggestions and Conventionally Indirect Suggestions** The temptation to hint rather than state suggestions clearly stems from the fact that underlying any suggestion is a DIRECTIVE. Directives are attempts to get hearers to carry out actions, like moving a sentence to the end of a paragraph, capitalizing a word, unstacking a long noun phrase, or rearranging a table. Directives are what Brown and Levinson called FACE-THREATENING ACTS because they are speech acts that imperil hearers' NEGATIVE FACE: their sense of themselves as autonomous and free actors in the world. In contrast, tutors threaten POSITIVE FACE when they jeopardize hearers' connections to others, their sense of themselves as being appreciated or belonging [1].

As Mackiewicz and Riley showed, the directives that underlie suggestions can be conveyed with varying levels of clarity, and for the most part, increasing clarity means decreasing politeness [2]. For example, if a tutor's intention is to get a writer to include a table in the document, the tutor could state the suggestion DIRECTLY, saying *Include a table in this section*. Of course, most of us do not state our suggestions so directly, especially in the workplace. In most cases, our coworkers and clients would consider us to be quite rude in doing so, except in cases where time necessitated efficiency (e.g., saying *Watch out* to someone who is about to walk into a glass door). Thus, people, including writing tutors, decrease the directness with which they convey the directives that underlie their suggestions in order to increase their politeness. As Mackiewicz and Riley explain, speakers decrease the directness of their suggestions by increasing the LENGTH OF THE INFERENTIAL PATH their hearers must travel to interpret what speakers mean from what they say [2, p. 85]. The length of the inferential path from the direct suggestion *You should include a table in this section* to the underlying directive *Include a table in this section* is very short.

Besides stating a suggestion directly, a tutor might also state a suggestion with a CONVENTIONALLY INDIRECT strategy. However, using conventional indirectness lengthens the inferential path the hearer must travel from what the speaker says to the underlying directive. The inferential path is lengthened because such suggestions are ambiguous. For example, a tutor who says *You could include a table in this section* could mean either that the act of including the table is an obligation, or it could mean that the act of including the table is a possibility: The tutor's intention is ambiguous.

The present study focuses on suggestions that require their hearers to travel an even longer inferential path to the directives underlying them, suggestions stated with NONCONVENTIONALLY INDIRECT STRATEGIES, or hints. These strategies are discussed in the following section.

**Nonconventionally Indirect Strategies** When tutors make suggestions that require students to travel an even longer inferential path than a conventionally indirect suggestion would require, they have crossed over into the realm of nonconventional indirectness, or hints. In the case of a suggestion, a hint is an utterance that has an "off record," or unexpressed, underlying directive. For example, a tutor might say something like *This section has a lot of numerical data in the text* to convey the underlying directive *Include a table in this section*. The agent (*you*), act (*include*), and a component of that act, the object (*table*), are all elements of the underlying directive that are not present in the hint. That these elements of the underlying directive are not expressed causes the hint to exhibit multiple potential meanings. A tutor who says *This section has a lot of numerical data in the text* could intend that the student include a table. However, she might intend that the student delete some of the numerical data or that the student move the data to an appendix. She might also intend to praise the student for the amount of information he has included. She could intend any of these meanings.

Because hints allow for multiple interpretations, researchers have noted that they allow the speaker to deny any one underlying intent. That is, hints allow DENIABILITY [3, p. 94]. For example, a tutor who says *Technical abstracts tend to follow the organization of the research report* could deny that the directive she intends is *Summarize the method of the study before the results*. It is clear, then, that hints could be especially useful to tutors who are unsure of themselves, especially those who are unsure of their ability to give advice about technical writing related to engineering.

A useful model for understanding how hints generate multiple potential interpretations is Weizman's analysis of hints in terms of their OPACITY [3], [4]. She

categorized nonconventional indirectness in terms of type and degree of opacity on two dimensions. The first dimension, PROPOSITIONAL CONTENT, refers to the **words** a person uses when he or she utters a hint. This dimension contains three categories. These categories are delineated below and exemplified with the underlying directive *Include a table in this section*:

- (1) COMPONENT: A hint that refers to some component of the act, i.e., “the means by which the . . . act is carried out, its object, its beneficiary” [3, p. 79], e.g., *Tables aid in understanding data*.
- (2) ACT: A hint that refers to the act, e.g., *Including visual elements aids in understanding data*.
- (3) ZERO: A hint that contains no reference to the hearer, the act to be carried out, or any of the components of the act, e.g., *Visual elements aid in understanding data*.

Studying how English and Japanese speakers make requests, which are another type of directive, Rinnert and Kobayashi found that speakers most frequently referenced some component of the act. In the case of the English speakers' requests, 72.2% referenced a component of the act [5, p. 1189], e.g., *Are there any batteries?* [5, p. 1188].

The second dimension in Weizman's model, ILLOCUTIONARY DEVICE, refers to what the utterance **does**, as opposed to the words that a speaker uses to convey it. This dimension contains four categories of hints:

- (1) GROUNDERS: A hint that gives a reason why the act is necessary, e.g., *Tables help readers understand data*.
- (2) FEASIBILITY: A hint that asks for or states a prerequisite for the act to be carried out, e.g., *There might be room for a table here*.
- (3) ZERO: A hint that contains no statement of the underlying illocutionary intent, e.g., *Your book has a chapter on visual elements*.
- (4) OTHER: A hint that does not fall into one of the other illocutionary device categories, e.g., *I'm going to sketch a sort of visual element in the margin to show how one might present this data*.

Rinnert and Kobayashi found that English speakers preferred the first category, stating potential GROUNDERS, to other means of making illocutionary intent opaque, using them 47.2% of the time [5, p. 1189]. That is, they preferred to give a reason that the hearer should perform some act. However, English speakers also questioned FEASIBILITY 24.4% of the time in order to hint that the hearer should perform some act [5, p. 1189]. For example, they asked questions like *Do you have any chalk?* to request chalk from the hearer [5, p. 1188].

In sum, Rinnert and Kobayashi's research on requests shows that English speakers prefer to hint at their

underlying intent by mentioning some component of the act that they want the hearer to carry out [5]. In addition, providing a grounder for the act helps to show why the hearer should carry out the act. These findings suggest that people who hint want just enough clarity in what they say—provided through mention of a component of the act and a reason for the act—to bring the hearer within the realm of the meanings that frame their intent. The findings of this previous research shed light on **how** speakers create hints. These findings do not, however, explain **why** a speaker would make a hearer go through the trouble of traveling a long inferential path from an opaque hint to the speaker's underlying intent.

### RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DIRECTNESS AND POLITENESS

One possible reason that speakers, including writing tutors, might use hints is that they assume that the relationship between directness and politeness is a directly inverse one. That is, they may assume that the suggestions stated as hints are most polite because they are least direct. Tutors might hint, then, in an attempt to achieve extra politeness. However, some research on politeness suggests that hints are less polite than conventionally indirect strategies—the opposite of what one would expect [3]–[7]. In Blum-Kulka's study of decontextualized requests, participants rated conventionally indirect requests to be more polite than hinted requests [6]. These findings suggest that being polite also requires some amount of clarity in what one is trying to convey. Rinnert and Kobayashi explain that hinted requests may be perceived as less polite because of their “open-ended propositional content, linguistic form, and pragmatic force” [5, p. 1184]. The opacity of hints, their lack of clarity, led to less—not more—politeness. Thus, studies of decontextualized hints call into question the direct inverse relationship between directness and politeness.

On the other hand, the little research that has examined naturally occurring hints, as opposed to people's perceptions of decontextualized hints presented to them on tests, suggests that the directly inverse relationship may, in fact, hold when context is taken into consideration. Rinnert and Kobayashi found that hinted requests comprised 37.3% of all hints in their natural language data [5, p. 1190]. In contrast, participants selected a hint as the most appropriate form only 10% of the time in studies of decontextualized requests [3], [4], [8]. According to Rinnert and Kobayashi, the high frequency of hints in naturally occurring data suggests that people find hints to be an effective means of getting their point across [5]. In other words, people who use hints are still able to achieve some clarity in what they say, even though their utterances exhibit some opacity.

As Rinnert and Kobayashi point out, context may make a huge difference in the extent to which a hint will be clear and will, therefore, be considered polite [5]. The context, which lends clarity to hints, arises from what House calls a STANDARD SITUATION [7, p. 115]. In standard situations like interactions between a professor and a department secretary, “a large amount of knowledge is shared, and the relatively fixed expectations associated with the roles of the participants are reinforced through daily interactions” [5, p. 1190]. In other words, standard situations provide scripts that lend the pragmatic clarity needed to create a polite message, as Blum-Kulka postulated [6].

A tutoring interaction about writing would certainly be a standard situation, even if the participants had never met before. Both the tutor and the student share an idea of the purpose of their interaction. Each participant has an idea of his or her role in the interaction and the rights and responsibilities that role affords. For example, the tutor’s role affords the right and responsibility to make suggestions and offer criticisms. It also demands that the tutor organize and maintain the interaction. The student’s role affords the right and responsibility to ask questions and provide information. It also demands that the student accept advice, reflect on the writing, and try to improve the writing. This sort of contextual information “is likely to bridge the gap between the meaning of an utterance and its pragmatic force; thus it does not involve a long process for interpretation” [5, p. 1191].

Therefore, it may be that tutors benefit from stating their suggestions as hints because hints allow both politeness and deniability. The current study examines naturally occurring data to investigate other benefits that tutors may receive from stating their suggestions as hints. It also examines the problems for students that arise when tutors use this strategy.

## METHODS OF THE STUDY

**Interactions** This study examines 13 interactions about engineering writing to investigate how 12 writing tutors (5 male, 7 female) who were working with 12 engineering students (9 male, 3 female) used hints to make suggestions. The interactions lasted about 30 minutes and were transcribed in full. The 10 tutors were writing instructors who taught freshman composition at a mid-size, midwestern university. Five of the instructors also taught advanced writing courses, such as business and science writing courses, but not the university’s engineering writing course. The tutors’ teaching experience ranged evenly from 1 to 10 years, averaging 4.58 years. The 11 engineering students were either enrolled in their university’s engineering

writing course during the time of the study or had completed the course during the past academic year. They brought engineering-related writing to the interactions: technical descriptions, project reports, project proposals, and technical abstracts. All of the participants—tutors and engineering students—were paid \$40 for participating in a tutoring interaction and a postinteraction interview.

**Procedure** A total of 424 tutor suggestions were coded as direct, conventionally indirect, or nonconventionally indirect. Suggestions conveyed with direct and conventionally indirect strategies were coded for person (first and second) and voice (active and passive) according to Mackiewicz and Riley’s delineation of politeness strategies [2] and Thonus’ coding of suggestions in writing center interactions [9]. Both of these studies used the coding framework of Blum-Kulka et al. [10]. Students uttered few suggestions, and their suggestions were not included in this study.

Coding hints was a more difficult task. Much of the time in cases of direct or conventionally indirect suggestions, tutors’ suggestions fall into what Thonus calls “tight evaluation-suggestion sequences” [9, p. 233]. The following exchange is an example:

- (A1) Tutor Evaluation: *The phrasing here is a bit awkward.*
- (A2) Tutor Suggestion: *You could write “My purpose is to propose a project on thermocouples.”*
- (A3) Student Response: *Okay.*

Thus, in Thonus’ terms, a tutor’s statement of a suggestion (A2) is a step that falls between the tutor’s evaluation of a problem (A1) and the student’s tacit or verbal acceptance or rejection of that evaluation (A3).

When the tutor and student discussed a problem but the tutor did not state a direct or conventionally indirect suggestion, the utterance most relevant to the problem was coded as a hint. The most relevant utterance was not necessarily an evaluation, as Thonus described [9, p. 233], as the following exchange shows:

- (B1) Tutor: *Headings help readers understand the organization.*
- (B2) Student: *Okay.*

Utterance (B1) was coded as a hint because it was the most relevant utterance that the tutor made about the topic of headings. It is important to note that although short responses like the response in (B2) indicated that students had at least understood the words that tutors had uttered, those short responses did not necessarily indicate that students had interpreted tutors’ utterances as suggestions.

Once the hints were identified, they were further analyzed according to Weizman’s model to determine

whether any type patterns emerged [3], [4]. Three types of hints were found, as outlined in Table I.

To assure the reliability of classifying hints into these three types, a test of interrater reliability was performed. Three raters assigned one of the three types to 20 transcript excerpts that contained hints. Interrater reliability was determined by calculating Cohen's multirater Kappa for each pair of raters and averaging those results. A mean Kappa score of .93 was found. This is a satisfactory level of reliability for the hint types.

As Table I shows, hints are more complex than previous analyses have revealed. Previous analyses, including Mackiewicz and Riley [2, p. 91] and Blum-Kulka et al. [10, pp. 280-281], have classified hints into just two categories: strong and mild hints. Analyzing hints according to Weizman's model allows for a clearer analysis of why tutors would use hints because it systematizes the opacity of the directives that underlie tutors' hinted suggestions. The present study explains the propositional content and illocutionary device of the three types of hints delineated in Table I. It also analyzes the benefits and drawbacks that might arise when tutors modulate opacity to create these three types of hints.

**THE THREE TYPES OF HINTS**

After the hints were categorized according to Weizman's model [3], [4], a count of how frequently tokens of each type occurred was carried out. This frequency count appears in Table II.

Clearly, tutors relied most often on evaluations to hint at their suggestions, a finding that corresponds with the attention that evaluations have received in previous studies (e.g., [2], [9]). Tutors relied less often on general rules and elision to hint at their suggestions. This section describes the three types of hints in terms of their opacity to answer the following question: What benefits and drawbacks did hinting impart?

**Evaluations** As noted before, prior research on tutoring interactions has suggested that tutors tend to cycle through evaluation-suggestion sequences (e.g., [9]). In these sequences, the suggestions are often direct (e.g., *Move this chart*) or conventionally indirect (e.g., *You could move this chart*). The evaluation element supplies an illocutionary device—a grounder—for carrying out the suggestion [3, p. 88]. Thus, Blum-Kulka et al. call these evaluation elements SUPPORTIVE MOVES because they supply a reason for carrying out an act [10, p. 275]. As noted above, though, tutors do not always complete the sequence by stating a direct or conventionally indirect suggestion. Instead, they may state only an evaluation.

When a direct or conventionally indirect suggestion is not forthcoming, the evaluation becomes the suggestion—a hint. In Weizman's terms, relevant elements of the underlying directive are missing the propositional content of what tutors actually said [3], [4]. For example, Lisa stated the following reason that

TABLE I  
TYPES OF TUTORS' HINTS

Type of Hint	Opacity on Weizman's Model		Description	Example using the underlying directive <i>Write "I describe three screwdrivers."</i>
	Propositional Content	Illocutionary Device		
Evaluations	+ component	+ grounder	The tutor states a mild or strong negative assessment of some element of the writing.	<i>The detailed description of the screwdrivers is confusing.</i>
General rules	one or more { + component + act + agent	+ grounder + feasibility	The tutor states a guideline that is applicable to writing besides the student's writing.	<i>Introductions usually state the topics that will be covered without going into detail about them.</i>
Elisions	+ component	+other	The tutor omits elements of the propositional content without replacing them; often used with exact rewording of a phrase.	<i>Just "I describe three screwdrivers" here.</i>

the student should follow her underlying directive, *Insert a parenthesis here*:

Lisa: *A parenthesis might be better.*

Lisa leaves out the act, *insert*, and the agent (the hearer), *you*. What is left is a component of the suggestion—a *parenthesis*—and thus her utterance is counted as a hint.

This study suggests that tutors use evaluations that range along a spectrum of mildly negative to strongly negative. Tutors' strongly negative evaluations can be called criticisms. Context plays an important role in determining how evaluations are interpreted, whether an evaluation comes across as a mildly negative assessment or as a criticism.

*Mildly Negative Evaluations*: When tutors stated mild evaluations, they provided reasons for their underlying directives by making observations and stating opinions. These observations and opinions demonstrated mild dissatisfaction with the writing. Consider the following example, in which David assesses punctuation rather than stating the underlying directive, *Delete this comma*:

David: *This comma doesn't need to be there.*

The reason that David gives in support of following the underlying directive is an evaluation of an element currently in the student's writing, but it is not an assessment that strongly evaluates the writing, such as *The comma placement is faulty*. Similarly, when Lisa stated *A parenthesis might be better*, she referred to a way to improve the writing and avoided a strong negative assessment. Thus, both she and David make evaluations that fall short of what most people would call criticism.

It must be noted that by **noticing** some element of a student's writing—even with a mild evaluation—tutors imply that the element is at least a candidate to undergo some change. That is, the student must assume that if the tutor has taken the time to point out some element of the writing, she believes that there is a possibility that the student should change that element. The relevance of this analysis for tutors, then, is that mild evaluations are useful because they permit tutors to disavow an underlying directive while still calling attention to some element that warrants change. This benefit might be one reason that tutors

preferred this strategy when they used hints, as the frequency count of hint types suggests.

*Strongly Negative Evaluations (Criticisms)*: Tutors also hinted at underlying suggestions by stating evaluations that criticized elements of students' writing. These evaluations relied to varying degrees on context for strength in their negative meanings. Evaluations that relied on context for their negative sense seemed to be less strong and less threatening than evaluations that would be interpreted as criticisms no matter their context, but research on students' perceptions of criticisms would have to be done to verify this preliminary finding. In the example below, Jillian states an evaluation that is a criticism by virtue of the fact that the student's assignment, a technical description, calls for objectivity, not persuasiveness:

Jillian: *It sounds like you're trying to get people to go out and get Craftsman Joint Pliers.*

This statement counts as a criticism within the context of the student's assignment. Because the student's assignment asks him to describe a mechanism objectively, not to sell it, the tutor's assertion that what the student has written is appropriate for an advertisement rather than a technical description is a fairly strong criticism.

Other negative evaluations depended less on context. For example, Stein stated the following hint, which would be interpreted as a criticism in most contexts:

Stein: *It just has a few redundancies.*

Because there is nothing inherently negative about redundancy, the tutor's statement relies to some extent on its context for its negative sense. In some contexts, such as safety checking, redundancy is beneficial, necessary, and expected. Even in the realm of writing, redundancy is sometimes useful. For example, a writer might restate a main point or finding three times within a research article. In the context of writing a technical description for an engineering writing class, however, this statement conveys an underlying directive like *Delete the redundant sentences*, and thus conveys a rather strong criticism.

A few of the tutors' negative evaluations would have been interpreted as criticisms no matter their context. For example, Pam told a student the following:

Pam: *It almost makes it too jumpy.*

Whether that comment comes from a writing tutor, a technical editor, or a boss, and whether the recipient is writing a paper for a class, an SOP, or a project report, the comment counts as a strong negative evaluation. In other words, there is no context in which "jumpy" is a positive or even neutral quality. For the most part, tutors in this study avoided strong negative evaluations like this. The few times that tutors assigned pejorative labels like this, they used terms like *awkward* and *confusing*.

TABLE II  
FREQUENCY AND PERCENT OF HINTS BY TYPE

Type of Hint	Frequency of Hint Type	% of Hints
Evaluations	62	58
General Rules	22	21
Ellisions	22	21
Total	106	100

*Mitigating Evaluations:* When tutors evaluated elements of students' writing in order to hint at a suggestion, they tended to mitigate, or soften, those evaluations with words that hedge, like *maybe*, and phrases that minimize, like *a little bit*. Mackiewicz and Riley discuss how such words and phrases, called DOWNGRADERS, soften the force of direct and conventionally indirect suggestions [2, p. 86], but this study clearly shows that tutors use downgraders to mitigate the force of evaluations (hinted suggestions) as well. Downgraders like *sort of* allow speakers to avoid communicating their attitudes precisely [1, p. 117]. In regard to discourse about writing, Hyland and Hyland found that downgraders were used to soften critical comments. They also found that downgraders were "most used to mitigate the full force of stand alone acts of criticism," as opposed to criticisms appearing in evaluation-suggestion sequences [11, p. 197].

The following example demonstrates several downgrading strategies that helped to mitigate the force of a tutor's criticism and, consequently, his nonconventionally indirect suggestion:

Doug: *Some sentences in here seemed a bit less concise than some of the others.*

Rather than labeling the student's sentences as "verbose" or "rambling," the tutor stated the goal for the sentences—conciseness—and paired it with the minimizing phrase, *a bit*, to convey a sentiment that was easier for the student to take in: that his sentences fell just short of the goal. In other words, the tutor circumlocuted around a stronger negative evaluation.

At least two other politeness strategies are at work in the way that this tutor conveyed his criticism. First, he used the past tense verb *seemed* rather than the present tense verb *seem*. Brown and Levinson call this strategy POINT-OF-VIEW DISTANCING because speakers use it to remove themselves from the time of their face-threatening acts [1, p. 204]. While it is true that the tutor may be referring to the time in which he read the paper, it would also have been possible for him to focus on the present, saying *Some sentences in here seem a bit less concise than some of the others*. Second, this tutor implies that other sentences that the student had written were, in fact, concise. Thus, the tutor mitigates this criticism with a compliment. As Mackiewicz and Riley point out, compliments are an effective strategy for mitigating coerciveness because they help build a sense of rapport and solidarity. However, if they are used too often, their effect may wear off because the student may begin to feel that the tutor is being insincere [2, p. 88].

*Relevance to Tutors:* A tutor who uses hints generates opportunities for miscommunication. When tutors do not complete the evaluation-suggestion sequence,

stating only an evaluation in order to hint at the suggestion, they lengthen the inferential path that students must travel to interpret their meaning. Even with the added clarity that the standard situation lends, achieving necessary clarity is especially a problem in the case of mildly negative evaluations. Unlike criticisms, mildly negative evaluations do not relay overt and, thus, strong negative assessments. In addition, like criticisms, mildly negative evaluations tend to lack clarity-enhancing components of the propositional content of directives that underlie them, such as the agent (the hearer) and the act. Therefore, students may be more likely to misinterpret or overlook suggestions stated as neutral evaluations. For example, a student may think that a tutor who says *A parenthesis might be better* is making an observation rather than making a suggestion.

Because mildly negative evaluations may generate miscommunication, it is probably wise for tutors to avoid them if their intent is to make a suggestion rather than to state an observation. Tutors may want to combine them with direct suggestions into evaluation-suggestion sequences (see [2, pp. 88–89]). For example, a tutor could say *This comma doesn't need to be there, so you should delete it*. In saying this, a tutor would make his or her underlying intent much clearer.

This recommendation is supported by prior research, which shows that tutors who are working with nonnative speakers generate miscommunication when they use evaluations rather than direct or conventionally indirect suggestions. Hyland and Hyland, for example, describe how a student misinterpreted a teacher's comment, *The conclusion may be a bit abrupt*, as simply a criticism of the content of her writing rather than as a suggestion to add more information to the conclusion [11, p. 205]. For this reason, when tutors work with students who are writing in a second language, they should pair their evaluations with more direct suggestions.

It is important to note, however, that the criticisms that tutors uttered in the present study reveal tutors' underlying directives, within the context of a tutoring interaction, can be clearer than prior research on hints would suggest. In fact, some criticisms can convey the general idea of **changing** an element of the writing in some way as well as conventionally indirect suggestions can. After all, if a tutor utters a conventionally indirect suggestion like *You could reorganize this flow chart*, the tutor's underlying intent is ambiguous. Does the tutor mean that reorganizing the chart is an obligation or that it is a possibility? In contrast, if the tutor utters a criticism like *This flow chart is confusing*, the criticism conveys an obligation to change the chart in some way, although the specific act of "reorganize" is missing. Thus, if a tutor's responsibility were simply to identify elements

of writing that need change, criticism would be a viable choice.

However, pointing out faults in a student's writing is of course not a tutor's only responsibility. Indeed, numerous handbooks and essays about effective tutoring practice make clear that evaluation should not be the primary focus of tutoring. Instead, tutors aim to provide instructive feedback, suggesting specific changes that students should make to their writing. One tutor, for example, said the following about going beyond error identification:

Doug: *I think criticism of anything without corresponding acknowledgment of or advice toward how it can be better is just criticism. It's the actual building—How do you build on that criticism and improve on being criticized.*

In addition, research suggests that students prefer tutoring interactions in which they receive targeted suggestions. Walker and Elias correlated students' ratings of their tutoring sessions with discourse elements manifested in the sessions. They found that the interactions rated highly were those in which the discussion focused on ways to improve the writing as well as evaluation of it [12, p. 278]. Tutors aim to provide instructive feedback, suggesting specific changes that students should make to their writing, and hints may impede their progress toward this goal.

In addition, prior research has shown that if tutors use criticism, they risk alienating students and decreasing students' confidence. Connors and Lunsford, for example, found that motivation and self-confidence suffer with too much criticism [13]. Murphy and Sherwood write that criticism "can leave a student feeling demoralized" [14, p. 14]. Riley and Mackiewicz relay an engineering student's perceptions of a tutor's criticism:

Student: *Reading and writing has always been a real struggle. . . . When I was looking at the sentence fragment I went "Oh God." (Laughs). It's a mess. . . . When you look at your sentence structure. . . . It triggers certain emotional responses. . . .* [15, p. 4]

As this student's reaction to a tutor's criticism makes clear, criticism can shake students' confidence. It is important to note, though, that the tutor who uttered the criticism that this student was responding to was quite inexperienced in tutoring. All of the tutors who participated in this study had more experience working with student writers; some of them had far more experience. Tutors who have some experience working with students seem to know intuitively that harsh words may damage students' motivation and confidence. One tutor said the following about criticism:

Danelle: *I think comments that maybe aren't helpful is- are when they start. . . getting*

*too negative. Where they're almost- almost attacking the person and not the writing.*

The tutors in this study, including the tutor quoted above, tended to use a variety of mitigation strategies to soften their criticism.

In sum, this analysis of how tutors hinted their suggestions with mildly and strongly negative evaluations suggests that the context of a standard situation makes those evaluations more clear than previous analyses have indicated. Even so, this study also suggests that tutors would make their suggestions even clearer, and perhaps more polite, if they were to combine mildly negative evaluations with direct suggestions. Doing this would also lessen the chance of miscommunication. In addition, even though criticisms can, in a sense, demonstrate more clarity than conventionally indirect suggestions, they may not offer students specific direction for improving their writing. Also, criticisms can shake students' potentially fragile confidence and motivation to continue at the writing task. It seems, then, that tutors should avoid criticisms.

**General Rules** Tutors also used hints when they stated their suggestions as general rules for writing, relaying rules or guidelines that most writers tend to follow. Tutors used this strategy to make suggestions about topics ranging from rules of punctuation to conventions of technical writing, including rules about spelling, visual aids, and the content of technical abstracts. Tutors' general rules acted as grounders because they supplied reasons for complying with the underlying directive. They also conveyed the feasibility of carrying out the intended suggestion because they indicated that others carried out the same act with regularity.

When tutors used general rules to hint at their suggestions, they varied the elements that they left out of the propositional content. For example, Frank used a general rule hint to suggest that the student should provide a key to the symbols she had used throughout her document because a key could facilitate novice readers' comprehension. The directive underlying Frank's hint was something like *Include a key in the appendix*:

Frank: *A lot of times authors will put a list of symbols back in the appendix and that's meant for that audience that you really don't know about.*

Frank explicitly states one component of the underlying directive—the list of symbols. He does not, however, make the act (*include*) explicit.

Similarly, Alan stated a generalization about writing, a convention that holds across genres and disciplines. Instead of explicitly stating the underlying directive *Use more common words*, Alan relayed a convention that most writers tend to follow:

Alan: *That's a good rule. Ah, if you can simplify it, you know, and what not. It'll make it- it makes it more enjoyable for most people.*

Neither the act that the student is to carry out nor the *common words* component of that act is present in Alan's hint. These two examples, then, show that tutors state general rules that vary in the elements of the underlying directive that are stated in the propositional content.

Interestingly, though, tutors sometimes used the second-person pronoun *you*—the agent of the act that tutors tended to omit from other hinted suggestions—in their general rules. The pronoun *you* could either refer to anyone in an impersonal sense or could refer to the student in a specific sense, so tutors' general rules sometimes contained ambiguous agents. Alan's use of *you*, for example, is ambiguous because the referent of the pronoun might be the student in particular in addition to all other writers in general. Thus, some of tutors' general rules mimicked the form of more direct suggestions in that they contained a second-person agent, even if the referent of that agent was not certain.

Tutors benefited from using the general rule hints in a couple of ways. When they used them, their suggestions sometimes turned into short lessons about writing, allowing tutors to slip into the role of instructor rather than tutor, a role that has higher status. Tutors could hardly go wrong in the subject matter they chose to address in these lessons. If tutors generalized about what writers tend to do, as Alan did, they indicated that they had a wealth of experiences to draw upon. After all, you need to analyze many single cases before you can determine characteristics that those cases have in common. If tutors talked about specific rules, such as punctuation or spelling rules, they indicated that they are familiar with the minutiae of writing. In stating either variety of general rule, then, tutors bolstered their status as experts in writing.

In addition, this strategy allowed tutors to dissociate themselves from their suggestions, conveying that they were merely messengers of bad news, not the creators of it [1, p. 6]. Even as they asserted expertise, then, tutors assumed less responsibility for their advice.

*Relevance for Tutors:* These findings suggest that stating an underlying directive as a general rule decreases clarity and, therefore, increases the chances for miscommunication. Indeed, even when tutors' general rules contained ambiguous *you* pronouns, the general rules lacked other propositional content elements that would have lessened their opacity. It seems, then, that tutors who intend to convey directives should combine general rules with direct suggestions to create rule-suggestion sequences. For

example, Frank could have said, *A lot of times authors will put a list of symbols back in the appendix and that's meant for that audience that you really don't know about. So add a key, a list of symbols and their meanings, to the appendix here.*

Even in light of this recommendation, it is important to note that those who train tutors would likely agree that tutors should feel free to provide short lessons about punctuation, format, or any other relevant topic that a student could benefit from or is interested in. In *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors*, for example, Ryan tells tutors that they can give lessons on a variety of topics to help students make decisions: "You explain how to organize a comparison and contrast paper, clarify the rules for using a semicolon, or explain strategies for invention" [16, p. 23]. It seems, however, that the rules tutors state should not replace suggestions that clearly refer to specific elements of the student's writing in particular. As Keh found in her study of modes of feedback on student writing, "Students...described helpful comments as those that point out specific problems and provide suggestions, examples, or guidelines for revision" [17, p. 302]. Tutors' general rules can move the conversation away from individualized advice. In sum, it seems that tutors should avoid using general rules without pairing them with direct suggestions.

**Elisions** As discussed above, a hint that is uttered in the context of a standard situation is likely to be considered more polite than a hint that does not benefit from the clarity such a context provides. The type of hint that best illustrates the importance of context to clarity and politeness is the elision strategy, which occurs when tutors omit most of the propositional content of their suggestion and leave students to "fill in the blanks." Brown and Levinson put this another way, saying that elision allows people to leave a face-threatening act like a suggestion "hanging in the air" [1, p. 227].

When tutors used elision to convey suggestions, they left out the agent of the suggested act (the student) and the act itself, but they explicitly stated a component of the underlying directive. What is interesting about their use of this strategy, though, is that the component consisted of exact words, phrases, or sentences that students could insert directly into their papers. For example, rather than saying *Write that "It's designed in a way to reduce or minimize vibrations to the user" or You should write that "It's designed in a way to reduce or minimize vibrations to the user,"* Danelle elides both the agent (the student) and the act (writing) below:

Danelle: *Maybe just um you know that "It's designed in a way to reduce or minimize vibrations to the user."*

Similarly, another tutor maintains one component of his suggestion—a complete phrase that the student

can insert into his paper—but he takes the student (the agent) and writing (the act) out of the suggestion:

David: “*Based on correspondence with the two companies*” or *something like that*.

The tutor elides most of the propositional content but provides words for the student to use. He uses this hint strategy rather than saying *Write “Based on correspondence with the two companies” or something like that* or *You should write “Based on correspondence with the two companies or something like that*.

Because most of the words in the propositional content of elisions are words intended to be used in the student’s document, these hints tend not to convey why or how an act should or could be carried out. That is, elision hints do not use grounders or statements of feasibility as an illocutionary device. Unlike evaluations and general rules, then, elisions fall instead into Weizman’s “other” category for illocutionary device. Weizman does not describe this category in detail [3], [4]; however, in terms of this study, it is possible to say that tutors conveyed the illocution—the suggestion—through the exactness with which they provided words and phrases.

Even though tutors supplied exact words and phrases, they failed to state explicitly the agent and the act components, relying on the context of the interaction to supply this information. By providing words and phrases, though, tutors made it quite easy to determine the act being elided—writing. In addition, that they provided particular words and phrases indicated that they were fairly certain about the legitimacy of their suggestions. In a way, this specificity compensated for the opacity generated by their use of elision. Thus, this strategy seems unlikely to generate miscommunication.

Tutors may have obtained other benefits from this strategy which, interestingly, mirrors a preferred Japanese politeness strategy of providing just one component of a face-threatening act. Miller describes how a Japanese professor made a request for her lunch by saying only *o-bento* (lunch box), avoiding explicit expression of the request by eliding the agent (the secretary) and the act (getting the lunch box) [18]. According to Rinnert and Kobayashi, using elision in this way helps speakers build rapport because it suggests that the people involved are “close enough to share some presuppositions” [5, p. 1192]. It also avoids a negative appearance of “verbosity” and “aggressiveness” [18, p. 45]. Thus, it performs both positive and negative politeness functions.

*Relevance for Tutors:* Elision allows tutors to deny their underlying intent, as all hinted suggestions do. However, tutors should realize that when they provide exact words and phrases to students, they limit the set of possible agents and acts that exist within the interaction context. This level of clarity

might be enough for a hint to be considered polite. However, there is a pedagogical dilemma inherent in this strategy: To use it, the tutor has to do some of the student’s work. Thus, this strategy may tempt students to choose the easy route of unquestioningly adding a tutor’s words and phrases to their writing. By providing students with exact words or phrases to insert in their papers, tutors may prioritize the short-term goal of making the writing-at-hand better and, consequently, neglect the “big picture” of helping students become better writers. As Thompson writes, “we are attempting to teach students metacognition—or ways of thinking about their own thought and communication processes—as a foundation for more successful and independent thinking and communicating in the future” [19, p. 2].

This is not to say that tutors cannot contribute words, phrases, and even entire sentences to students’ writing in a pedagogically sound way. For example, they can provide synonyms for words that students have used to demonstrate how to achieve a desirable tone. A tutor might provide the word *pay* to replace the word *remunerate* if the document called for a less formal tone. Also, when tutors provide synonyms, they give students more options to start their searches in the thesaurus for the *mot juste*. A tutor could contribute a sentence or two to a student’s writing as well. A tutor might replace a sentence that is long and difficult to parse with two shorter, more readable sentences. About demonstrating readable and effective writing for students, Clark writes, “Imitation may be viewed as ultimately creative, enabling the imitator to expand previous, perhaps ineffective models into something more effective which ultimately becomes his or her own” [20, p. 93]. By providing words, phrases, or entire sentences, tutors model the vocabulary and syntax that are appropriate for the student’s purpose and audience. With this strategy, then, tutors can provide individualized instruction.

In sum, when tutors not only use the elision strategy but also provide words and phrases to students, they generate several social and pedagogical benefits. However, elision is a strategy that tutors should use sparingly. If they provide words and phrases to students too often, they risk doing students’ work for them. Thus, it appears that tutors should use this strategy with caution—perhaps once or twice per session—to model effective and readable writing.

## CONCLUSION

This study found that writing tutors use hints quite often in making suggestions to engineering students. Out of the 424 suggestions tutors made in the 13 interactions, 106 were stated as hints. That tutors use hints so often—25% of the time—suggests that they sensed or assumed that using less directness in their suggestions generates more politeness.

Although prior research on decontextualized hints called that assumption into question, more recent research on contextualized and naturally occurring face-threatening acts suggests that standard situations like tutoring interactions provide enough context and, consequently, clarity, for hints to be considered polite. Thus, tutors might be right to assume a correlation between indirectness and politeness. Even though tutors' hints contain little of the propositional content of their underlying directives, the standard script that tutoring interactions follow seems to lend enough clarity to tutors' hints to make them more polite than previous research on decontextualized hints indicates.

This study also indicates that tutors use hints for other reasons as well. First, even though the standard situation of the tutoring interaction lessened the opacity of tutors' hints, hints by definition allow deniability of the directives that underlie them and, thus, give tutors an "out." Second, both evaluations and general rules allow tutors to provide a grounder or reason for changing the text in some way. Hints stated as general rules have the added benefit of indicating that the suggested act is indeed feasible. General rules also allow tutors to give mini-lessons in topics like punctuation or visual aids. Elision allows tutors to build rapport and to model effective composition. It is likely that these benefits draw tutors to hints.

It is important to remember, however, that even though tutors' hints obtain greater clarity by virtue of the standard situation in which tutors utter them, hints are more likely to generate miscommunication than direct or conventionally indirect suggestions because students must "fill in" elements of the underlying directive that are missing from the propositional content. Mildly negative evaluations may go unnoticed or may be misinterpreted because they not only lack elements of their underlying directives, but also because they lack an overt signal that some change in the writing is necessary. Strongly negative evaluations provide such a cue, but they may not provide specific advice for improving the writing and may threaten students' confidence. When tutors state general rules, they obscure their underlying directives by referring to writers *en masse* and not referring to the student writer in particular, generating opportunity for miscommunication and neglecting individualized feedback. Elision has immediate benefits for students, but tutors who provide words and sentences risk doing students' work for them and risk overlooking their responsibility to create, in

North's words, "better writers, not better writing" [21, p. 438].

I have reviewed the benefits and drawbacks of tutors' use of three types of hints to convey suggestions. Based on this study and on previous research, I have recommended ways of using the three types. I've summarized these recommendations in Table III.

TABLE III  
TYPES OF HINTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Type of Hint	Recommendation
Evaluations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Combine mildly negative evaluations with direct suggestions to make complete evaluation-suggestion sequences, e.g., <i>The introduction contains two lists. I would format one of them as a vertical list.</i></li> <li>◆ Avoid strongly negative evaluations to avoid threatening students' confidence and motivation.</li> </ul>
General Rules	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Combine general rules with direct suggestions to make complete rule-suggestion sequences, e.g., <i>Steps of instructions are usually written as imperatives. So I would change these sentences so that the action is stated first.</i></li> </ul>
Elisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Use elision (and provide words, phrases, and sentences) sparingly to avoid doing students' work for them, e.g., <i>Write "We timed the boot up of each operating system."</i></li> </ul>

It is important to note that Table III focuses on hints, not direct and conventionally indirect strategies. As noted in Mackiewicz and Riley, using direct suggestions, especially opinion statements, allows a speaker to balance clarity and politeness effectively [2, pp. 89, 92]. Most of the time, tutors should use direct rather than hinted suggestions.

I have attempted to answer the question of **why** tutors would use hints to convey their suggestions to engineering students. In the process, I have delineated the benefits that tutors gain from using hints, but I have also examined the drawbacks for students that arise when tutors use hints. It is my hope that writing tutors and others who work with technical writers, especially engineering writers, will find this analysis and these recommendations helpful in creating more effective interactions.

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