

Tutors

By Carolyn Smith

When I graduated high school last spring, I thought that I was ready for college. I had been a star student all four years, keeping up steady A's and never getting below a B in any class. Taking the Honors or AP option that was offered for any class was a default for me. I got into all of the colleges that I had applied for, and from those chosen SUNY Plattsburgh was the best fit for me.

Plattsburgh seemed to have the perfect balance of everything. Two hours was far enough away from home, yet not too far. The classes seemed to be academically challenging, but not so difficult that I would fail them all. The university had an active student body on campus, with plenty of fun events during the week and on the weekends. I didn't have a major in mind, but Plattsburgh also offered many opportunities for me to explore a variety of classes and subjects in order to help me decide. When the semester started, I was excited—and with my student ID and weekly planner in hand, I felt ready to embrace the lifestyle and workload that a typical college experience demanded.

It turned out that college demanded a lot more than I had prepared for.

In high school, I felt like I was good at every subject. However in college, I felt like the subject was either too boring—such as Anthropology and United States History, which were both lecture-style—or I was having trouble with the assignments, like in my Literary Studies, Statistics, and Psychology classes. I was

so overwhelmed with homework and studying that it started to get in the way of any attempts to have a social life. Not only that, but focusing on any one class too heavily seemed to distract me from doing well in my other classes. What I had loved about SUNY Plattsburgh was the balance that it seemed to offer, but now my life was utterly out of balance.

When I sat down at my desk in my dorm room to write my first real college paper, the blank Microsoft Word document mocked me from my laptop screen. The assignment was for Literary Studies: a 4 page essay on character development in *Anne of Green Gables*. I had read the book and participated in class discussions. But even with the prompt in front of me, I had absolutely no ideas in my mind. Since I had over a week until the paper was due, I had gone to my professor asking for help with getting ideas flowing, but instead of working with me, she simply directed me to the Learning Center and suggested I work with a writing tutor there.

Fear struck me. In the near month that I had been at this college, I had never even heard of the Learning Center. I had just gotten familiar with the basics of the campus. I could navigate easily between my dorm, the dining hall, and my classes, but not much else. I knew where the library was, but because I chose to do my homework in my room, I didn't know my way around it very well. With the directions given to me by an upperclassman in Literary Studies, who had overheard my conversation with our professor after class, I managed to find the Learning Center on the first floor of the library, near the computer lab.

I approached the desk, where a student who looked to be a few years older than me was sitting at a computer. I stood on the other side of the desk for a moment, and they didn't even look up. My heart started racing, and I cleared my throat ever so gently. They still didn't look up, so I took a deep breath and squeaked out a "Hello?"

The girl looked up, but didn't say anything. "I'd like to make an appointment with a writing tutor?" I asked with a shaky voice.

"Sure. When?"

"Um, tomorrow?"

"There's an appointment time open with Cassie at 4pm."

"Uh, that's okay."

"Name?"

"Amelia Terry."

She clicked away on the computer, and then the printer started whirring. She handed me the slip of paper that came out of it. The only information on it was what she had already told me: the date, and time of the tutoring session as well as the name of my tutor, Cassie. I folded it in half and tucked it into my backpack.

The next day, my palms were sweaty before I even left my dorm room for the appointment. My heart was pounding in time with my footsteps on the walk from my dorm to the Learning Center. I gripped my backpack straps tight, one hand on each, clutching because it held the assignment that had gotten me into this situation. I could feel two magnets pulling me in opposite directions as I walked—

one, my fear, telling me to turn around and avoid what was sure to be one of the more embarrassing 45 minutes of my life. The other was obligation, which kept my feet stepping one in front of the other. I had signed up to attend a tutoring session that began in five minutes. I *had* to go. I couldn't turn back now.

When I got to the Learning Center, the first thing I did, once again, was approach the desk. "I have, um, a writing tutoring appointment? Right now, with uh, Cassie."

The young man who was working at the desk that day turned to look behind him, into the greater area of the Learning Center, his eyebrows pinched together as he searched. "Uh, she's over there." He pointed in a general direction. "She's in the blue sweater."

After a moment of rapid searching, I noticed her, sitting by herself at a table with a few colored sheets of paper in front of her. I took a deep breath and took a step in that direction.

"Wait," the guy's deep voice stopped me. "You have to sign in."

When I looked back at him, he was gesturing to a clipboard that sat on the desk between us. My face heated up so fast, as if someone had held a blowtorch under my chin. I filled in the next empty slot on the form, carefully writing the date, my name, and the time in what was hopefully my neatest handwriting. My hands felt a little shaky and weak from nervousness.

Everyone seemed to be watching me as I walked to the back of the large room, towards where Cassie was sitting. Wondering who I was, what I was doing

there, if I really looked like the type of person that needed help. Was this their safe space that I was intruding on?

As I approached Cassie's table, she noticed me walking towards her and made eye contact. I vaguely registered that she was giving me a warm smile, but all I could really focus on was her brown eyes, and what judgments she must be making about me behind them.

"Amelia?"

"Mia," I corrected as I sat down in the chair next to Cassie, the heat returned to my face—or perhaps it had never really left.

"Nice to meet you, Mia. I'm Cassie."

I had to avoid eye contact again at all costs—I hated the way people's eyes seemed to be looking into my soul. I immediately began shuffling through my backpack looking for my assignment, a notebook, and a pencil. I didn't like writing in pen. It felt too permanent. It wasn't until Cassie asked me what I had brought with me did I realize that I hadn't responded to her after she introduced herself. I sighed internally, absolutely sure that Cassie now thought I was being totally rude. What a great first impression.

I tried to smile as genuinely as I could despite my anxiety. "Um, I have a paper due next week on *Anne of Green Gables*, and I um, I don't really know where to, like, start? I guess?"

Still avoiding direct eye contact but no longer having papers to shuffle, I picked at the tiny bit of dirt under my thumbnail. What if Cassie thought I was a slob, and therefore lazy and not worth her time?

“Okay. What class is this for?”

“Literary Studies. Just like, um, basic English kinda. It should be easy but I’m really nervous about it.”

“Sorry, what was that?” Cassie asked.

I realized that I had mumbled the last part.

I took a deep breath. “I’m probably just overthinking it,” I said, a little louder. “I’m not usually this bad at essays.”

“Can I see what you’ve written so far?”

“Um, no?” I dared to sneak a quick peek up from my hands to see what Cassie’s reaction was. “It’s just that I, um, I don’t have much written yet, and now I know that I probably should have brought something, I mean this is like a *writing* tutoring session and I didn’t even bring any writing... gosh, I’m so stupid. I can write something tonight and make another appointment—”

“No, no, it’s fine!” Cassie said brightly.

I tried to relax and slow down my heart rate, wiping my sweaty palms on my jeans. I hoped it didn’t leave a mark there.

Once again, it wasn’t until she spoke again that I realized that I hadn’t answered Cassie. Her tone this time was shifted a bit from the bright, almost too-friendly tone she had been using so far. “Hey,” She said, more softly than before. I

could already feel that her tone now had compassion woven in. “You seem a little nervous. Are you alright?”

“I just, I’ve never—” I took a second to swallow the built up saliva in my mouth so I could attempt to speak properly. “I’ve never been to a tutoring session before so I didn’t really know what to expect, and I’m just not really very prepared. And I’m really nervous about this paper, too. I’m a freshman and this is the first college paper I’ve ever been assigned, and I really want to do well on it, because it seems like I’m not doing very well in much else. My professor wasn’t much help when I asked her, so I’m just... I’m kind of lost. And stuck.”

“I can totally help you brainstorm ideas,” Cassie reassured. Her friendly voice no longer seeming fake to me. Comparing her current tone with what she was using when I first sat down, I didn’t believe that she was ever using a voice that didn’t come completely naturally to her. “It’s not unusual for tutees like you to come in with nothing written yet because they are stuck on what direction to go in. As a writing tutor I can help someone with a paper at any stage, from brainstorming to final editing.”

“Okay,” I said, letting out a breath of air I hadn’t realized that I’d been holding.

“Do you have the prompt with you?”

“Yeah,” I said, and moved the sheet of paper with the prompt typed out on it over towards her side of the table.

“Why don’t you read it aloud to me?”

“I, um...” Reading in front of people was not my favorite activity, especially not in front of people I barely knew. I always get too nervous and stumble over my speech, stuttering and mispronouncing easy words. “Here, you can just look at it.”

I nudged the paper even closer to her. Without pushing me further about wanting me to read, she simply bowed her head and read the prompt silently to herself.

“Okay... so character development in *Anne of Green Gables*. Hm. If I read that book, it was a long time ago, and I honestly don't remember very much of it. What can you tell me about the characters?”

“Well, it's about this girl named Anne who gets adopted by this older couple, Marilla and Matthew—well, they're brother and sister—when she's 11. She's got a pretty unique personality...”

Once I got started talking and I noticed that Cassie was actually listening to my words and ideas instead of scrutinizing my every action, I found it much easier to speak to her. I still had trouble making eye contact, but I was like that with everyone. I found myself unable to stop talking, just rambling on about the different character and what each of them were like. When I finally finished and stopped to take a break, Cassie stepped in.

She looked down at her own notebook, the open page of which was now littered with notes. “Okay, so some things that I really caught from what you said are...”

From there, Cassie helped me organize my thoughts and narrow them down in order to help me develop a thesis. We—well, I—decided on which character I would focus on in my thesis and throughout my paper, and then we wrote up an outline of my paper, down to what I was going to write in each paragraph.

“We’re almost out of time,” Cassie reminded me at one point after she checked the watch on her wrist. “How do you feel about this paper now?”

“Um, better. I’m still nervous but at least now I know where to go.”

“I think you’ll be able to sit down and write this paper easily now. You have all of your paragraphs mapped out in a pretty detailed way—don’t worry about it too much, okay? You have lot of good ideas, so I think if you put a good amount of effort in, you’ll be happy with it in the end.”

I allowed myself to smile, and even make eye contact. “Really?”

“Yeah,” she smiled that warm, friendly smile again. “Relax a bit. It’ll be okay.”

“Thank you so much, Cassie,” I said, returning her smile.

“My pleasure. Have a good day, and good luck!”

“Thanks,” I said again, still smiling as I walked away.