So your writing partner misses a meeting, one of your ID001 students wants to have follow-up feedback after you’ve met in person, or maybe you’re just really generous with your time and services. Whatever the reason, you’ve agreed to do an email consultation. How should you interact with the student? How do you apply non-directive tutoring tactics when you’re not talking in a shared space? How do you even have a productive consultation when you’re not talking at all?

First off, don’t worry – it’s not as bad as it might seem or sound. It’s true that basic minimalist tutoring practices – sitting beside the student, having the student hold the paper and read it aloud, etc. – are really only applicable for in-person consultations (Jeff Brooks, “Minimalist Tutoring”). But the principal values of student-centric, process-oriented, collaborative tutoring still apply to email consultations. And there are even some unique advantages to consulting over email.

Making the Student Start the Conversation

When you participate in a face-to-face consultation, you typically start by asking general questions about the course, professor, and assignment, and by inviting the student to voice their own concerns and questions. In email consultations, you can and should do the same thing. Before the student sends you their draft, make sure they don’t just email you with an attachment of their draft. Ask them to articulate their understanding of the assignment, and to explain their concerns or questions when they do send you their draft. Just as in face-to-face consultations, this “keep[s] the students in charge of their writing,” and the permanence of their written-down thoughts makes their control seem all the more meaningful and real (David Carlson & Eileen Apperson-Williams, “The Anxieties of Distance,” Taking Flight with OWLs).

Encourage the student to be detailed in their explanation of the assignment and especially in their articulation of their concerns. In all likelihood, they’ll naturally include more detail, since people tend to elaborate more when writing than talking, especially with regards to complex issues and ideas (Muriel Harris & Michael Pemberton, “Online Writing Labs: A Taxonomy of Options and Issues”). You could also point them to Gordon Harvey’s “Elements of the Academic Essay” and ask them to articulate their concerns in relation to Harvey’s terms. Or if you know the student has problems with something in particular, ask them about it before they even send you the draft. Regardless, encouraging your student to actually write about their ideas in a no-pressure situation “help[s] to demystify the act of writing,” especially for those who are anxious or apprehensive about their writing (Mark Mabrito, “E-mail Tutoring and Apprehensive Writers,” Taking Flight with OWLs).

Responding to the Student

There are three ways to respond to your student and their draft, in order of importance (from absolutely essential to sometimes helpful): writing a draft letter, including marginal (or line-by-line) comments, and suggesting online resources.
Writing a Draft Letter

The draft letter encompasses your big-picture comments – it’s where you identify the student’s general strengths and weaknesses. You can probably just include this in the body of the email, but it is important that you write your email in letter form. Doing so demonstrates that the consultation has “an emphasis on exchanges between people, and not a focus on product” (Lee-Ann Breuch & Sam Racine, “Developing Sound Tutor Training for Online Writing Centers”).

Your draft letter should contain the following elements:

1. Greet the student.
2. Introduce yourself and explain the nature of the consultation, e.g. “I’ve identified some big picture issues in this letter, and there’s line-by-line comments on your attached draft.”
3. Reflect back what the essay is doing through summarizing its overall argument, e.g. “As I understand it, you argue…”
4. Compliment something about the paper.
5. Reflect back and address the student’s concerns.
6. Identify two or three general areas for improvement, and carefully explain what you mean by each comment.
7. Close with encouragement and positivity about their paper moving forward.
8. Sign your name.

(Adapted from Dara Regaignon’s sample draft letter to “Esther,” provided to English 87 students)

Including Marginal Comments

Marginal or line-by-line comments are useful for pointing to specific moments (good or bad) in a given paper, and for illustrating your draft letter’s general areas for improvement with specific examples. Microsoft Word lets you add comments that correspond to specific passages, or you can set off your line-by-line comments by bolding them, changing their color, bracketing them, etc. Regardless, it’s a good idea to let them know in your draft letter what method you’re using for marginal comments, so that there’s as little confusion as possible.

Marginal comments should primarily be used to ask insightful, provocative questions. With line-by-line comments, it’s easy to fall into a directive, “fix-it” mode, so you have to be careful to maintain your non-directive role. Don’t hone in on grammar or word choice, and avoid diagnosis; instead, use marginal comments to connect specific moments in the essay to bigger picture concerns (Breuch & Racine, see above).

Suggesting Online Resources

The beauty of tutoring online is that you are never tutoring alone. There are countless writing resources around the web that can help supplement your suggestions. If your draft letter employs Harvey’s academic elements, or if you think your student would benefit from a particular wiki page, include links to the appropriate pages. If your student keeps making certain grammar mistakes, point them to an online style guide or tutorial to help them out – research even suggests such self-paced, solitary grammar instruction can be more effective than face-to-face instruction (David Coogan, “E-Mail Tutoring, a New Way to Do New Work”). No matter the issue, there is a wiki page or FAQ out there (probably at Purdue’s OWL) that can supplement your tutoring, and further help your student.