



The Caltech Y RISE PROGRAM

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What Works & Doesn't Work in Tutoring

Tutor-Led Workshop with Rise Program Tutors, Alex Phillips & Shalaka Dewan (Caltech Graduate Students)

What works

- Keep things light
- Give the student choices
- Make it relevant
- Get to know your student
- Real Life Applications
- Use Humor
- Be Yourself
- Commiserate with them

What Doesn't Work

- Too much Detail
- Demanding attention
- Romance talk
- Jumping to assumptions
- Not admitting your own challenges
- Starting with negative opene

What Works

Keep things light – Biggest challenge is getting students attention and maintaining it for 2 hours. Students can come to tutoring tired and have been at school all day. You can start with:

- How was your day?
- Are you feeling any stresses related to school work?
- Any quizzes coming up?

Open the door to light conversation.

Give the Student choices – Let the student decide what they want to work on first (math or science). Even if you know they need more help in math, it's okay to let them decide to start with science. You can say sure, "Sure, let's start with science and get back to math at the end." Make them feel like they are in control, but you are still guiding the process. After working a while on science you can say "Do you want to switch it up?"

Make it relevant by getting to know your student – Sometimes tutors think of the break as a blitz to get to know them, but you can ask questions during tutoring to make your explanations more relevant. For example my student asked, "Why did they organize the periodic table this way?" She doesn't care about atomic size or number of protons, so I asked what sport do you play. She answered basketball. So I asked, "Out of everyone in this room who would you want as your point guard?" She looked around and pointed to the tallest person in the room. This helped her make the connection and made it relevant by using examples that she could relate to.



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Use Real Life Examples – e.g. fractions in baking and explaining how K-reactions were used to find the age of the earth. Students are interested in hearing about you. Any time you can tell them how you use this material/equation etc. in your research or school work, they want to hear that.

Humor – It's always great to use humor. You don't have to be super funny to tell a joke or use humor.

Be Yourself – Don't put up a wall. Get to know them and let them get to know you.

Commiserate with them – e.g. "Yeah, I had an awful Chemistry teacher in High School too, but now I'm a Chemistry major." This can get very negative, so talk about the positive that can come next. Like in college when they get to pick their classes.

What Doesn't Work

Too much detail – Even if their question requires a lot of background explanation, after 60 seconds they've probably tuned out. Keep it very relevant to their question. Keep coming back to the question and explaining how it relates. Don't turn it into a lecture. Even if they are looking at you and nodding, they've probably already checked out.

Demanding attention – It usually doesn't work to say, "Are you with me?" Instead try "you seem distracted. Do you want a minute?"

Romance talk – It's good to get to know your student, but avoid the do you have a girlfriend/boyfriend questions. You'll either come off as creepy or get a long explanation about high school romances. In general avoid overly personal questions. They'll open up when they're ready.

Jumping to assumptions – Never assume anything about your student. Get to know them first before jumping to conclusions.

Not admitting your challenges – This goes along with empathizing with your student. Let them know about your struggles, too. That you attend office hours. That it was hard to get that set finished. Don't tell them that you got a perfect score on your SAT or that you didn't have to study in high school. You don't want them to feel like you are on a pedestal. Relate and empathize with them. If you don't know the answer to something you should admit it. Show them how you find the answer and teach them that skill.

Starting with too negative openers – If you ask your student "how was your day?" and they go into a lengthy explanation of everything horrible that happened and then can't focus on their work it might be better to start with a different question like "what did you cover in your math class today?" You'll be able to predict this by getting to know your student.

Exercise

Get to know your students' hobbies, likes, interests, etc. Then try explaining your own research in a way that is interesting and relatable to them based on what you find out.