

How To Choose A Good Math Tutor

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Introduction

Funding of public education is presently so scant that more and more people are seeking tutors, especially for math and science. The author of this article (Dr. Sonya Sokolow) has been tutoring math (through calculus) since 1983. She has a PhD in Education from Stanford University, with a special emphasis on Design and Evaluation of Educational Programs (DEEP). She is a California credentialed secondary math teacher.

Classical teaching principles are important to use when tutoring math. **Very often, tutors just show the student how to do the homework problems. That's not enough.** This is a guide to help you choose a good math tutor for a student. This guide will delineate essential characteristics of a comprehensive math tutoring system which not only deals with clarifying comprehension of the subject matter for the student, but also includes a communication network which is essential for support of the student to reach specified cognitive and affective goals.

A student or a student's support group (often the student's family) begin to realize that the student needs help. So what's the first step to take in searching for this help? Now-a-days the Internet is searched. In the past, and also present, nearby colleges have been called to obtain references for local tutors. Sometimes word-of-mouth references can be found. Most often, tutoring fees (dollars/hour) are a determining factor for tutor selection. Also used for selection are whether the tutor is willing to travel to the student, instead of the student traveling to the tutor's office or meeting-place choice. **Hidden within all these choices are important questions that should be answered before choosing a tutor.** This article has a target audience of those people trying to evaluate their choices of available math tutors.

Does the math tutor candidate have training and experience in teaching/tutoring?

Math tutor applicants who are themselves math students, at any math level, generally concentrate on simply solving homework problems for the tutor recipient (tutee). It is a natural inclination for these tutor candidates to want to prove to themselves that they can do the problem(s). Thus, the task of teaching the tutor recipient how to do the problem becomes secondary to inexperienced tutors.

Does the tutor provide a focused environment for tutoring?

It is important to provide individual tutoring help in an environment where the tutee is focused on the tutor's instruction. It is tempting to have the tutor travel to the tutee's home, however this temptation should be avoided. There are many distractions at home that can interfere with the tutee's attention to the tutor's instruction. These distractions can be minimized with forethought, but seldom does forethought occur in the home environment. This caveat applies to Internet Math Tutoring (IMT) as well; the computer being used for IMT should be in a quiet room with no distractions, including no telephone ringing, no door bell ringing, and no background conversations.

Does the tutor document tutoring sessions online, with invitations to individuals in the student's support group?

Teachers, counselors, family members are all candidates for being in the tutee's support group. The tutor should have a way to document tutoring progress online, with invitations to monitor selected elements of the progress 24/7. Using Google online spreadsheets is an example of a method for documenting progress online and inviting selected support group members to monitor progress.

Does the tutor look ahead with the tutee at upcoming subject matter, with the intention of

providing focus for the tutee during the teacher's subsequent lecture on that subject matter?

At the tail-end of each tutoring session (which is not just before an exam), the tutor briefly should look ahead with the tutee at the upcoming subject matter to be covered in the next lecture by the teacher. From experience, the tutor will/should know what material in that subject matter is likely to be confusing to the tutee. Looking ahead will give the tutee focus as well as confidence to ask questions during the lecture.

Does the tutor teach/guide the tutee to learn techniques which will help the tutee "learn how to learn"?

There are teaching principles and techniques which will help the tutee to "learn how to learn", especially during instances when the tutor is not available to help the tutee to solve particular homework problems. For example, the tutor can show the tutee how to use the table of contents, the index, and sample problems in the text for the purpose of solving particular problems of similar nature to the homework problems. Other sources of help can be provided by Internet search engines, assuming the tutee knows what are the relevant keywords to use for the searches.

Does the tutor have the ability and motivation to determine prerequisite skills of the tutee which may be weak, thus causing inability to solve the homework problems?

When a tutee can't do a particular math problem, there may be weak prerequisite skills which need to be refreshed for the tutee. The tutor must be motivated from experience or from pedagogy to help the tutee to master the weak prerequisite skills.

Does the tutor provide follow-through with the tutee to make sure that objectives, goals, promises, test corrections are accomplished in a timely manner?

It is critical that the tutor makes sure that the tutee accomplishes tasks mutually agreed to be important to reach mastery, including test corrections and promises made by the tutee. Online spreadsheet documentation of each session aids in supporting follow-through.

Does the tutor offer flexible scheduling for times and durations of tutoring sessions?

Scheduling times and lengths of sessions is quite dependent on tutee achievement and attention span. A good tutor will arrange for flexible scheduling so the the tutee has timely support for exams.

Does the tutor observe the mind-frame of the tutee at each session?

The tutee's failure to grasp subject matter may not be due to cognitive achievement. Sometimes affect in the tutee's life can cause temporary stumbling blocks in being able to achieve the objectives or solve the problems. A good tutor will try to remain aware of the tutee's mental state during the sessions. With tact, mental turmoil often can be elucidated and possibly subdued so that the tutoring session will be maximally helpful.