
Where Else

Jean Smith

Sitting next to me, at a round table in one of the gray partitioned areas of the College Writing Center, and housed beneath a green grubby baseball cap was a doe-eyed, unshaven first-year student. After we introduced ourselves, and exchanged a firm, reassuring handshake, I asked John how I could help him. He said, on a loud inhale of breath, that his eight to ten page paper was due at eleven o'clock the next day. He had to change his topic because someone else had chosen the same one. He was especially annoyed over this because he had done a lot of reading for it, and now it was of no use to him. He had had a hard time finding articles for his second choice topic, which was something to do with trees in Maine, and the subject did not excite him in the same way.

All this information was anxiously spewed forth as if some inner floodgate had suddenly been released. I asked if he wanted me to read his paper. His chin went down, and the oval face disappeared into the peak of his cap. He mumbled a reply saying he hadn't written it yet, but was seeking help in getting the paper started. He added reluctantly, "I've never written a research paper before." His level of anxiety at that point, I felt, was tangible.

I encouraged him to talk about what he had read. As he spoke, it was clear he had a good grasp of the research material, but he didn't know how to get it down on paper. Thoughts of how to fill eight to ten pages with writing were overwhelming to him. His

words, like a needle stuck in the groove of a broken record (remember those?) kept harping back to the number of pages.

I said, “We need to prioritize. Let’s focus on getting your ideas down on paper. I know that right now you will not believe this, but experience has taught me when writing papers that if you just make a start on the writing, the number of pages takes care of itself.” I got no verbal response; he simply tipped the peak of his cap further up off his brow, exposing the dark even arch of his eyebrows, and looked skeptically into my face.

I began by explaining that he needed an introduction, middle, and a conclusion. I spoke about freewriting, and how it was a useful tool in unraveling the solid mass that information has a knack of becoming when it is trapped in your brain. “Try it,” I encouraged, moving my elbows from the edge of the table and laying my back against the support of my chair. He began writing. We collaborated for a while, freeing up more ideas. He wrote some more. The conference ended when he had a rough draft incorporating an introduction with a main idea and middle, and he was confident about the content of his conclusion.

Driving home that night my mind was full with thoughts of John and his predicament. Memories of my fledgling first weeks in college, and my anxiety and fear over my inability to write papers, came flooding back to me. I smiled reminiscently to myself, as John’s voice etched with anxiety and frustration echoed perfectly my own tender beginnings. I recalled, only too well, how debilitating I found the length of a paper when I had no clue how or where to begin. What is interesting to me, as I look back at myself, is that I remember thinking I was unique. I believed, because I had not been in education for so long, that I must be the only student on campus who didn’t know how to write a paper. It had been over thirty years since I finished high school, or secondary school as it is called in Scotland.

The circumstances of my life opened a fantastic window of opportunity, one I never imagined I’d have. I was born in Scot-

land, left school at age fifteen, and went to work in a textile mill. I served a four-year apprenticeship and did the same job for twenty-seven years. I entered college in September of 1995, the same month I turned forty-seven. I had applied to study at Plymouth State College because I needed a student status in order to live with my husband, also from Scotland, who had moved to New Hampshire in 1991. The only writing I had ever done, with any regularity in my life, were keep-in-touch letters and occasional postcards to family and friends. My education was so far behind me I couldn't remember how I knew the things I did.

I felt bombarded and afraid of the plethora of academic papers listed on my syllabi. There were two research plus two compare and contrast papers, journal entries in response to readings, response writing assignments, and a presentation. I didn't know how to compare and contrast. I wasn't even sure if I knew what it meant. I'd never read textbooks before, and I found them slow reading and the content intimidating. It amazes me now when I look back and realize that in the beginning I had no clear idea how I was going to meet my course requirements.

Eleanor Clough, my art teacher, announced in class that students having problems writing a response paper she had assigned should go along to the College Writing Center in the basement of Mary Lyon. Up to that point I didn't know there was a Writing Center. The assignment for my art class, I thought, was great. We had to visit the Karl Drerup Art Gallery. Back then, it was in the first and lower floors of Hyde. I remember descending gingerly down its totally unpractical, but hip, spiral staircase. We had to browse the exhibits on both levels and write a one-page response on the piece of our choice. I enjoyed the experience enormously, and found it easy to scribble down my thoughts on the exhibit that particularly moved me.

Later, I took my paper along to the College Writing Center, and introduced myself to Nancy Hill. Fair-haired and petite, Nancy was one of the professional members of staff. She asked me about

the assignment. We talked awhile, and I showed her what I'd written. My sense, from our conversation, was that if I was satisfied I'd met the requirements of the assignment then that was all right. I headed back up the basement stairs and out into the daylight. I remember the sense of relief rising within and settling over me like the warm sunshine; my face lifted symbolically toward the blue of the sky, my eyes scrunched protectively against the glare. I muttered to myself, "Thank you God, thank you." Knowing there was a place on campus where I could get help with my papers made a world of difference.

When our assignment was handed back, Elenor Clough was very encouraging in her response. She asked if I'd mind her showing my paper to the faculty member whose work I had enjoyed. Imagine my pleasure on realizing that my response, handwritten on a small, yellow Depot Office notepad would mean something to someone else! It was an unforgettable and rewarding experience.

I hadn't signed up to take composition my first semester, and so finding the College Writing Center, I came to realize, was crucial for me. I entered college as an undeclared, undecided student because, quite simply, I hadn't a clue about what I wanted to do when I was finished, or where my abilities lay. I felt stupid answering, "I don't know," to people's obvious and interested queries about what I was going to do after college. College education, all aspects of it, was a vast unknown. It felt like an open-mouthed being that was ready to devour me and I was teetering on its steady bottom lip peering anxiously and unseeingly in.

My subsequent visits to the Writing Center were my lifeline during the semester, I didn't appreciate it at the time, but there were things I had to unlearn. I had many misperceptions. One was my belief that when people physically wrote something on paper it was automatically not just word but form and grammar perfect. It was at the Writing Center I was shown, literally, that writing is a process and that a draft has no relation whatsoever to the cold air

sneaking in under the door.

Both Roy Andrews (the director) and Nancy would show me actual drafts of papers, some they had worked on: three and four drafts with parts circled, notes suggesting changes or different word choice in the margins, paragraphs or whole chunks of writing crossed out, and I remember how this amazed me. Here it was before my eyes, and each draft was one step closer to the writer's final one. It took time for me to realize and understand that what goes spoken through a writer's head can be unclear and confusing to the reader. Once I realized writing is a multi-layered process, I felt the first tentative stirrings of ability.

The Writing Center became a place I felt comfortable doing my work. I went there to write journals, freewrite ideas and begin drafts, or read. In the fall of 1995 the center was literally a hallway in the basement of Mary Lyon. From the bottom of the echoing stairs, where the banister disappears down into the false floor, you look left into a long narrow room with many doors. Roy's office, a small room offering privacy to consult in, and a tiny cluster with two computers along the right side comprised the College Writing Center. The rest of the doors remained locked and their interiors a mystery that I had neither the time nor inclination to ponder. The hallway was furnished with a cast-off, dull orange, simple tweed-weave sofa and a deep, seventies green, box-shaped armchair, the kind that welcomes a weary body and claims your rear as its own when you occupy it.

My inability to write papers scared and silenced me. In using the writing center I was acknowledging that inability, and at first I found that difficult to come to terms with. The learning experience of those first tentative visits to the basement opened me up to the realization that to do the required writing for my classes, I had to jettison my negative feelings and concentrate on what I needed to learn. Each time I entered the building I was reminded of the time I went to the hospital to give birth to my daughter. On entering the hospital I knew I had to leave my modesty behind. The moment I

entered that clinical domain I was resigned to subjecting myself to the unmentionable. I felt alone, vulnerable, and afraid of the unknown. One week later I left the hospital with my precious bundle of joy, my ordeal behind me, and mentally picked up my modesty where I'd left it on the hospital doorstep.

That was my attitude as I started using the College Writing Center. There were thoughts, beliefs, ideas, and emotions I had to put aside in order to go forward. I rationalized that if individuals knew everything, there would be no requirement for this educational establishment I'd committed myself to for the next four years. It was the combination of Roy and Nancy's professionalism, non-judgmental and non-directive philosophy they used while working with me that helped me to realize being ignorant didn't mean I was stupid; yes another misperception. This approach made it easier for me to cast my inhibitions aside, as I had my modesty all those years ago.

The wide-mouthed being of my imagination, that I was sure would swallow me whole, didn't seem so daunting. The more I embraced my ignorance the freer I became. I felt questions were forever on my lips, I realized how stimulating and positive they could be. There was much I needed to learn, and so much that was new and exciting.

I have worked at the College Writing Center as a writing consultant for two years. Students like John make me realize how ordinary and typical my experience as a first-year student was. The negative connotations of the word "ignorant" can hinder and silence the inexperienced. We each have to find a way to overcome that negativity. After all, where else but in a seat of learning can you say "I don't know how," and in response get all the help you'll ever need.