

The

# WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER

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Writing labs are complex places, as we keep reminding ourselves every day. The articles and requests in this month's issue focus on two ends of one of those complex spectrums--the need to concern ourselves with writers and their attitudes, fears, and prejudices as well as to provide materials for them (and ourselves) to learn from. It is a delicate balancing act indeed. If you can offer any help or response to several reader requests included in this issue, do consider sharing your reply with the rest of us as well as the person asking for help. In particular, the question of gathering some materials for new labs is a frequent one and never has enough answers. What have you acquired for your lab? Does it work? Let us hear from you.

And, of course, keep sending your articles, reviews, announcements, questions, names of new members, and yearly \$7.50 donations (in checks made payable to Purdue University and mailed to me) to:

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## BEYOND HOWDY DOODY

They walk in our centers and labs with a chip on their shoulder sometimes. And why not? It's tough to admit weakness and to face the hard work ahead. Worse still is doing it with a stranger. So we know the first step in an initial diagnostic conference is to get to know the student by drawing up a composing profile. We also know that it is usually the first thing to bite the carpet when the heat is on and we're scrambling from mangled draft to spelling emergency.

"Hello. And what are you working on

today? Let's take a look at your writing. Now what was the assignment?" And suddenly the student's worse fear is confirmed: "I, like my writing, am a faulty product that will be examined and treated by this authority figure. I should sit passively and let myself be examined, as if at a doctor's office."

But the good doctor always gets a new patient's case history. He knows that any ailment can be properly understood and treated only in the context of the individual who has it. Good medicine means treating the patient, not just the symptoms.

The following "Composing Profile" is one way to structure the initial contact with a student and, possibly, to avoid cutting corners. Each set of questions has its own goals and gradually leads the tutor and student in a natural way from a general, how-do-you-do way of interacting to a more specific focus on writing background, writing process, and finally the assignment itself. The goals for each stage give purpose to questions and thus provide a needed direction to the initial contact, a shaky time for new peer tutors especially.

Following such a procedure insures that the "doctor" treats the whole patient, not just a set of symptoms, and lets the student feel more like a person than a lab specimen. Also, immediately engaging the student in responding to questions clears the path for active participation in the conference. And urging the student to self-reflect opens the doorway to self-insight--the most important kind of learning.

When meeting with a student for the first time, tutors in our writing center do not ask each question on the list. We use the "Composing Profile" as a training tool to help us to internalize the four categories of questions (biography, writing background, writing process, the assignment) and to fish in each area for important responses, simply making sure we've adequately covered all four. The specific questions asked and

their wording are less important than meeting the goals for each stage.

Asking these kinds of questions before getting started saves time and makes a difference in our ability to help on more than a superficial level. Writing problems are almost always like icebergs. It's the part you don't see that is important. The "Composing Profile" is one way to see below the surface of the prose to the submerged habits, feelings, and attitudes that are at the heart of the writing and the human being sitting next to us.

### COMPOSING PROFILE

#### Set I-Matters of Fact

- A. Goals: (1) to break the ice, put the student at ease, and establish rapport
- (2) to determine the willingness or motivation level of the student to collaborate and do the work you ask
- B. Questions: Could you help me spell your name? (also useful when you've forgotten the name)
- Where are you from?
- What year are you in school?
- What is your major?
- Did a teacher suggest you stop by?
- What course is that?

#### Set II-Writing Background

- A. Goals: (1) to define the student's self-image as a writer
- (2) to assess the amount and quality of previous writing experience
- B. Questions: What kinds of writing have you done in high school and college courses?
- What are the strengths in your writing?
- (Not "as a writer." Keep the focus on the writing and not on an ego.)
- What would you most like to improve?
- (Not "your weaknesses")
- What kind of writing do you like to do the most? the least?

#### Set III-Writing Process

- A. Goals: (1) to find out the student's present writing process
- (2) to determine areas of strength and weakness in that process by comparing it to model strategies
- B. Questions: How did you go about writing this?
- What did you do first, second, etc.?
- Are these the steps you usually like to follow?
- How many drafts did you write before this one?
- How long before the assignment was due did you begin?
- When you revise, what are the things you try to change?
- Did you reread the assignment before you began to write?
- Did you talk over the assignment with your teacher or another student?
- Has your grade on an essay ever been lowered because you didn't fully understand the assignment before beginning to write?

#### Set IV-The Assignment

- A. Goals: (1) to determine if the student understood this assignment
- (2) to identify what problems the student had with the assignment
- B. Questions: What was the assignment for this paper?
- Do you have the assignment sheet or class notes with you?
- What was the most difficult part of the assignment for you?
- What part of the assignment did you do well?
- Was there anything about the assignment that you didn't understand/that you were unsure of?

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HELPING STUDENTS TO PROOFREAD

"Can you proofread this paper for me?"

Several years ago our current head tutor automatically turned away anyone who came with such a request. In fact--in irritation at students who expected a "quick fix" of their papers and in response to complaints from instructors whose students had, after receiving tutoring help, turned in letter-perfect papers that were a quantum leap above their previous barely-adequate efforts--she eventually said that tutors could give no help on papers-in-progress.

The problem is a real one, but the response is inappropriate, I feel, for the real mistake is in the approach of the tutor rather than in the request of the student, who has at least shown an awareness of his need for help with his writing and of where to come to get it. An untrained or poorly-trained tutor will automatically take a teacher-centered, pencil-in-hand approach when asked to proofread a paper. I train my tutors to respond to the request in a way that puts the pencil in the writer's hand and the responsibility for the paper on his shoulders. Here, step-by-step, is how we do it:

1. Though the student has specifically requested proofreading rather than feedback on "higher order concerns," I usually at least acknowledge these with a statement like the following: "You feel you have met the requirements of the assignment and that the content and organization of the paper are OK. What you want from me is feedback on possible errors in your paper." Such a statement makes it clear that writing is more than a matter of correctness and that there are other areas in which feedback is possible and help available. It also clearly places the responsibility for the content of the paper on the student.

2. "I'll be glad to read your paper, tell you what problems I see, and show you how to find these in your writing. First, will you please read your paper aloud to me?" (If it's long, just the first page or two.)

3. After the reading, I make one or more of the following responses, as appropriate: "Did you spot any errors as you read aloud?" "What types of problems/errors do you tend to have in your writing?" "What comments do your instructors usually make on your papers?"

4. At this point, I read the paper (again, if it's long, just the first two pages or so) with the student sitting next to me and looking on. If I spot one of the errors he has mentioned, I stop and say, "Yes, this sentence contains one of the errors you said is a problem for you. Can you spot it?"

5. I give feedback to the student on common errors, either confirming or modifying the student's own assessment. Together we decide on the major errors we will look for (not more than three types at a time.)

6. At this point I introduce the student to the proofreading method I learned from Rita Pollard at the 1984 New York College Learning Skills Association conference--probably the single most useful practical tip on helping writers that I've ever received. Basically, the student proofreads the paper backwards, sentence-by-sentence, marking off one sentence at a time with 5x8 index cards (we keep a supply on our writer's resource table) or half sheets of colored paper. We do the first few sentences together, with the student manipulating the cards and reading each sentence aloud. I just sit there quietly next to him, leaving a big silence for him to fill. If he needs prodding, I'll ask him to name the errors that we're looking for and then ask him whether he sees any in this particular sentence. If he has trouble remembering, I'll ask him to list on the card the errors we're seeking and then to write an example of each as we find them in his paper.

7. After we've done a few sentences and spotted a few errors together, I turn the student loose to proofread the rest of the paper on her own. Some choose to continue right there in the writing center, checking with me if they run into a problem or when they are done. Others prefer to go home to complete the proofreading work.

8. After the student has sweated over his proofreading, I don't hesitate to point out remaining errors that he may have missed--if he wishes me to do so. I may also mention other criteria of writing quality that could have been addressed and encourage the writer to come in earlier next time if he would like help in those areas.

Some students--particularly those who

would prefer to drop the paper off on their way to class and pick it up an hour later--are disappointed to discover that we won't function as a pit stop for papers. Most, however, seem to feel they have received the help they needed, and some are delighted to find they are gaining control over this important part of the writing process. And we feel that we have had a chance to demonstrate our usefulness to the student without taking over the task--and without turning her away at just the moment when she has realized and expressed her need for writing assistance.

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Visible Language, a journal concerned with research and ideas that help define the unique role and properties of written language, has produced a special issue on "Promoting Plain English." This issue (Vol. 20, No. 2, Spring 1986) includes articles on analyzing approaches of "plain language" laws, defining problems of plain English, discussing programs for improving documentation, and describing computer programs that aid in composing and editing. Copies of this special issue are available at a cost of \$5/copy and can be ordered from Visible Language, 2643 Eaton Road, Cleveland, OH 44118.

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WRITING ANXIETY: CONNECTIONS  
BEYOND THE WRITING LAB

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Molly first came into my office in mid-fall of 1983 for help with an interdisciplinary course for freshmen called the Great Conversation. Students earn credits in both English and religion through the course. Eight response papers as well as two critical papers are required. The response papers were only to be a page or page and a half. The instructors recommend spending no more than an hour on them, but Molly was

spending seven to eight hours on each one, as much time as on the three to five page critical papers. Consequently she was behind in the Great Conversation as well as her other courses.

Her verbal score on the SAT put her just one point above the cut-off for the screening test for our developmental English course. Some difficulties in writing and/or reading might have been expected. In our conference she demonstrated some insight into the readings, so her problems did not seem to be caused by lack of effort or ability in reading the material. Rather, she appeared to have a typical case of writing anxiety, reporting that she froze when she tried to start writing, and her mind went blank. I suggested the standard technique of not trying to start by writing the first paragraph, but by writing about the issues she knew best. I also recommended rush writing, a technique in which she wrote as fast as she could for ten minutes or so about some facet of a paper assignment. The time limit seemed to help her get started. Although she was certain she could not produce any writing under those constraints to begin with, she did fill two pages and persuaded herself that she did have some ideas.

These two techniques contradicted her notion of a good writer as one who sat down and wrote papers perfectly the first time, from beginning to end. As Mina Shaughnessy pointed out, inexperienced writers simply don't know how writers behave (79). We also discussed setting a maximum time for her response papers, then handing them in, regardless of whether she thought they had reached perfection.

I saw her once or twice a month for the remainder of the year, and while she continued to spend more time on response papers than was warranted, her writing confidence and performance seemed to grow. She got a sense of the writing process, the need to allow time for preliminary thoughts and revision. She even got a B+ on her last critical paper for the semester in the Great Conversation course. Her confidence grew so much that she scheduled three courses demanding heavy writing for the fall semester. She wanted to continue to improve her writing, and would not be dissuaded. She thought she "ought" to take them.

When she came in the following September,

I began to be aware of another level of concern. She spoke of general anxiety about returning to St. Olaf. Again, that seemed logical to me with her SAT scores, and a high-achieving older brother. Her ostensible writing anxiety brought her in to appointments nine times in September, eleven in October, ten in November. This regularity was highly irregular for our drop-in center.

A pattern began to emerge. She could work only on one paper at a time, prompting her to develop a complex time table to complete all the papers for the three writing courses she was taking. She was repeatedly paralyzed by anxiety. When she blocked on a paper, it meant the schedule was skewed, and her anxiety was compounded because she couldn't meet her schedule. Her professors seemed to be an audience she was sure she could not please. I suggested that she try a first draft as a letter to someone that she saw as friendlier, a technique that worked for a while.

The three courses were, fortunately, not all of a piece. The Creative Writing course was a contrast to the other two based on readings for the second year of the Great Conversation and a religion course on the Renaissance/Reformation. Creative Writing provided some relief from the expository writing, although Molly still felt inadequate for the task. She did learn some techniques for writing poetry and fiction, two genres she'd never attempted before.

In September I had suggested she keep a journal about her writing to gain some understanding of precisely when she blocked and how she solved the problems. At each appointment thereafter she apologized for not having used the journal for that purpose. Instead she attempted to take control of the process by organizational techniques. She took copious notes on reading materials for papers based on texts, coding them with highlighters to show how the information might be grouped. When I suggested that she might want to put her notes in her own words rather than extensive direct quotes, she responded that they "said it so much better than I could." It took at least two more drafts to persuade her to reduce the overload of quotations.

Still hoping that the right organizational techniques would make writing easier, when she was home over Fall Break she got

more techniques to handle writing assignments from her lawyer father. She broke down paper assignments into their constituent parts before she outlined. With each new technique her optimism would surge, only to ebb in the actual writing of the assignment.

Her major problem was the initial risk-taking in establishing a paper's focus. In a typical conference before she started writing, I questioned her about her reading. She demonstrated over and over that she'd read the material on which the paper was to be based, but she could not develop a focus for the paper without my questioning her. I wondered whether Molly was one of those college students still in what Piaget described as the concrete stage of thinking because high level abstractions seemed to be so difficult for her. Yet my questions seemed to loosen the block in her thinking, giving her enough self-confidence to write.

Each time she came in she appeared a bit more depressed. Her smile came more and more slowly; tears came quickly. Finally, by early December I recommended counseling for depression. St. Olaf is on the 4-1-4 calendar, and the Interim term in January looked like a good time for that.

The counselor took two approaches to helping Molly. First she administered the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator to help her understand her strengths and weaknesses. At the same time she began working with her on assertiveness training. When I saw Molly six weeks later, I could see a marked change.

First, she no longer felt so overwhelmed by academic work and writing in particular. Her increased self-understanding gave her confidence in some of her strengths and some tools to deal with her weaknesses. Her organizational skills helped her to plan ahead. However, while her intuitive leaps in logic enabled her to arrive at interesting perspectives, she needed to explain them more clearly to those who might not make those leaps as easily. She was even able to work on more than one paper at a time. She was also reducing the time she spent on response papers, a goal she had not been able to meet before, and she suffered no grade loss. Her papers had a much stronger voice of authority, and her use of quotations was for buttressing her thoughts, not replacing them.

She brought me a handout from the Counseling Office that had been of particular help to her, "Ten Irrational Ideas" (Ellis). The three most basic ideas dealt with issues of personal rejection, competence, and victim behaviors. All three have obvious ties with writing behavior. Shaughnessy points out that inexperienced writers lack confidence in themselves in academic situations and fear that writing will not only expose but magnify their inadequacies (85).

Ellis suggests rational ideas to replace the irrational. One does not have to have "sincere love and approval almost all the time from all the people one finds significant," (1) nor does one have to be perfect or best at every task. Ellis encourages a problem-solving response about difficulties rather than emotional responses that view problems as catastrophic and oneself as a victim. Molly was able to use this cognitive approach to personal development and enthusiastically recommended it for others.

She came by my office again in mid-August to share her progress over the summer. She'd gotten grades ranging from A to C on three papers for one of her courses, and she felt she could see why. The "A" paper had been a narrower assignment comparing the scenes from a novel that she found easy to focus. The "C" paper assignment asked students to compare scenes from a variety of plays, leaving both scenes and significance to be chosen by the writer. She said that the openness of the assignment was still difficult for her because she wasn't sure of herself in such an undefined context. She continues to worry occasionally about what she "ought" to do because of professors' expectations, but is consciously combatting the anxiety.

No matter how many useful composition techniques her father or I suggested or how many new techniques she learned in Creative Writing, her writing anxiety would not have changed had not her perception of herself changed. As Stephen L. Kocer maintains in a recent article in WRITTEN COMMUNICATION, "Reading and writing do not consist of a set of subskills that can be isolated, practiced and mastered, and then used with the same sense of proficiency from one text to the next" (324). Writing is, as Shaughnessy says, "above all, an act of confidence"

(85). Referral to personal counseling can introduce useful tools for gaining that confidence.

The limits of this case study are obvious. Surely every student with deficient writing skills doesn't require personal counseling, nor will cognitive therapeutic approaches always be helpful. For that matter, if we can control the classroom environment, perhaps we can provide enough support for students to experience successful risk-taking with its attendant growth in self-confidence. On the other hand, working in a writing center only with symptoms rather than underlying causes can be futile. There is increasing evidence that simultaneous work in personal and academic counseling is a more effective way to improve student performance (Scott and Robbins 132), and it is one I'll consider much sooner when the next "Molly" comes my way.

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A READER COMMENTS . . . .

I received over 70 requests for my "writing assignment worksheet" described in the Writing Lab Newsletter last spring, including one from Australia and one from Mexico. The newsletter does receive a wide readership.

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A READER ASKS . . .

Can someone give a very brief list of recent readings on composition theory for the 1980's? I've been accused of being stuck in the 1970's.

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PERCENTAGE WRITING

A technique I have developed in teaching beginning writing is what I call "percentage writing." The technique seems to work on only a one-to-one, or at most, one-to-two ratio with students. Percentage writing goes a long way toward eliminating writing blocks, and at this point I must say that most of the studies done on writing blocks seem somewhat irrelevant to the teaching of basic writing--particularly writing in junior colleges and writing done by students coming from deprived backgrounds. The best study on the subject is Mack and Skjei's Overcoming Writing Blocks. But this is written for people who have the time to read it, as opposed to beginning college students who do not know what a transitive verb is and who think that "a lot" is one word. In short, most books and essays on writing blocks appear to be for individuals who already know how to write--or, at least, know how to write sentences.

Percentage writing involves the teacher in the writing process more closely than any other such process I have studied. It necessitates close student-teacher relationships, which in turn relieves the student of the fear that causes the block.

In beginning classes teacher-student communication of the type frightened students need is, as every teacher knows, difficult to establish because, as every teacher also knows, the size of most classes and the number of papers that must be graded preclude such communication. Percentage writing, then, is a laboratory technique; the teacher's meetings with one or two students creates an impromptu laboratory.

Freewriting exercises, in my experience, have failed because my students could not take the exercises seriously. They seemed to do so, perhaps even told themselves they were doing so, but the results were meager. Yes, freewriting seems to a degree to break down writer's block, but the stress (rightfully so, in my opinion) in almost all composition courses is on organization; my students could not bridge the gap between writing with total spontaneity and writing with clear organization.

So in a session with a soldier (most of my students were military people) I asked the student how he would begin a classification paper, breaking down the topic "soldiers" into several main categories. He answered, "Well, generals, colonels, lieutenant-colonels . . . ." I said that such a classification would be much too long for the short paper required. "What are the main types?" I asked. "I've been telling you the main types," he answered, exasperated. "Trust me," I said. "The paper would be much too long." He remained silent. "Look," I said. "It's this easy." And I wrote the first paragraph of the essay. My classification was "enthusiastic, lukewarm, actively hostile soldiers."

I then asked the student to write the first paragraph of a classification essay on housewives. He did so without hesitation, using precisely the same adjectives I had used. I employed the same technique and the housewife classification with another student, but after I had written the first paragraph I asked him to write the second. He stared blankly at my paragraph. Then I wrote the second paragraph. "Now you write the third," I said. "Believe me; it's just common sense," I continued. "Look at the introductory paragraph. What logically is the next step?" Using my topic and more or less my ideas and words, the student was able to write the third paragraph.

Too basic, some teachers might say, and you're forcing the student to think exactly

as you do. My answer is that unless a student can classify or organize a thesis effectively, he cannot be said to think at all rationally. In fact (to continue the dogmatic tone) he cannot be said to think at all.

And the practice works with much more competent students, with, in fact, that student who is the despair of every English teacher: the student who writes A papers but who is utterly bored by the fact, the student who, in other words, cannot use his or her imagination. I spent a session with one such student, asking her in vain to do something unusual, imaginative. (Nothing mitigates against students using their imaginations more than a teacher's ordering them to do so.) "Is this all you want from life?" I finally asked, angry. The student didn't answer. I sat for a moment and thought. "What exactly do you want from life?" I was sitting beside, not standing or sitting in front of her. "Well," she answered, "I want happiness, peace and satisfaction." "Surprise me," I answered. "Take that last noun and substitute something totally different. Something physical, for example. Have a little confidence in me." I continued. "I won't laugh." For "satisfaction" the student wrote "Chanel shoes." I laughed. "Good," I answered. "Now go home and write the paper.

The final paper was very funny. The student wrote a much longer paper than was required, with, as the paper progressed, less and less emphases on happiness and peace and more and more on Chanel shoes, her disgust at J.C. Penny shoes, obese women in supphose, etc. In another session the student outlined a process-analysis paper on buying a house. The outline was perfectly competent and perfectly boring. "Believe me," I said. "I think you're making progress. But make this woman selecting a house totally rational in her approach but totally insane in her goal." The student turned in a hilarious paper about a woman whose only interest in buying a house was perfect drains. At the end of the paper the woman was blissfully happy with a peeling, jerry-built construction whose drains were the best in town.

Within a few weeks I began working with two students at percentage writing. "Both of you write the first paragraph of an essay comparing and contrasting effective and ineffective commanders." Then I asked the

students to exchange papers and comment on each other's approach. Neither student was able to say anything helpful to the other, so I asked them to write the second paragraph of each other's paper. The first student--after some coaxing from me--was able to do this. The second student found that he had written a whole page on only the first element in the introduction, hence that the first element of the thesis was much too large. Thus, his colleague learned.

After a few sessions with these two students, they began organizing simple topics very quickly. At the fourth session I asked one of them to write the final paragraph of an analogy paper. This type of paper always seems to be hardest for students, but by now they were willing to try. "While you write the fourth, final paragraph, I'll write the third," I told them. They looked incredulous. "Be brave," I said, laughing. "We're in this together." Both of their final paragraphs could be built into an essay. And both students were able to fit my paragraph into a new essay.

Eugene Hammond, discussing the collecting process in writing essays, quotes Mary Shelley: "Invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating out of a void, but out of chaos" (149). Free-writing too often produces what the student sees as a void. But the key elements in percentage writing--relaxation and the idea that organizing an essay is simply a matter of common sense--eliminate the void. Believe in me, trust me, we're in this together; I'm sitting beside you. The sessions are not formally scheduled, not listed as labs. And the teacher must be as relaxed as the students, must not show that what is difficult for them is easy and/or dull for him. And the students know that the teacher is not being paid for the extra work he is doing.

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## PREJUDICE: HOW TO COPE WHEN YOU'RE NOT SURE WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT

"Why don't you make a list of things you feel are important about your topic?"

Without raising his eyes, my 30-year-old tutee pulled the paper towards him and out of my view, picked up his pen, and painstakingly started to write.

"Can we both look at your paper?" I asked.

"Well, all right," he said, as he positioned the paper between us. "Why are we making a list, anyways? I'm trying to write a paper, I don't want to go shopping."

As I explained the value of him seeing his paper's main points and various other ideas in writing, many different thoughts were circling the back of my mind. Why did he look so startled when he first saw me? Why is he so condescending? Is he prejudiced because I am young and female, or am I misinterpreting his resistance? I couldn't push these thoughts out of my mind, and they prevented me from concentrating as fully as I should have on the task at hand--tutoring. The session continued, with me struggling to push interfering thoughts out of my head, trying subtly to break down my tutee's defenses, tutor him, but with my tutee resisting me throughout.

"Why don't you try something called freewriting while I look at your paper . . . think about your topic and write whatever comes to mind, ignoring spelling, grammar, and style . . . just to get your ideas out of your head and onto paper . . . adhering to only one rule--you can't stop writing--even if you have to write "I can't think of anything to write.'"

This time, my tutee didn't verbally challenge my method, but by reading the expression on his face I could almost hear him thinking, "freewriting sounds like a real waste of time." His attitude was distracting and I wanted to address it, but I didn't. His hostility brought my underlying insecurities to the surface (I'm a new tutor), and I allowed myself to be intimidated into pretending that the situation didn't exist.

After twenty minutes, my tutee curtly thanked me and ended the session, leaving me tense and upset. Were the failures of this session mine or his? How could I have pinpointed the problem, established a better rapport, and tutored more effectively? I sat back and sorted through my thoughts in attempts to evaluate my performance and decide what else I should have done.

By deciding what went wrong in the above hypothetical tutoring experience, the reader can ascertain what should be done when a tutor recognizes what she feels may be prejudice. Prejudice is an appropriate issue for any tutor to examine, especially if the tutor has neither faced this issue nor considered it appreciably. Examining this issue would lessen the shock and indecisiveness felt if the tutor were ever in such a situation. I have never recognized prejudice in any of my tutees, and so investigating this issue is an opportunity for me to learn something new.

If prejudice were overt, I feel that it would be easier for me to deal with. When a tutor is straightforwardly attacked ("Are there any older tutors available--you're just a kid," or "I'm not going to be tutored by a girl") then a direct response is appropriate. The air is cleared and the tutee either leaves or stays.

However, I suspect that most prejudice is manifested subtly, as was done in my hypothetical session. The tutee sets up an uncomfortable distance, may make innuendos that attack the tutor's capabilities, and may accept suggestions with reluctance. These actions make my job as a tutor dealing with prejudice complex. I have to make several decisions rather quickly, or else the issue will remain on the "back burner" of my mind and interfere with the tutoring process.

First, I have to decide whether it is prejudice that has surfaced. It's possible for my expectations to interfere with my interpretive powers. I think that it may be almost instinctual to label the hostility, laziness, or aloofness of a tutee whose background is different from mine as pre-

judice, but differences of gender, race, etc. may be coincidental.

It may be some other attitude problem that needs to be addressed. It may be that it is the tutee's nature to appear distant. The tutee could also be making such a concerted effort to understand what's being said that he doesn't realize that he's making a skeptical face. Or perhaps he came to the session with unrealistic expectations (e.g., he expected the tutor to be a proof-reader or an editor); therefore, he would be unhappy with my tutoring methods. Or maybe the tutee is just frustrated and tired of writing.

How could I distinguish prejudice from other attitude problems? There are no hard and fast rules, and so I must rely on interpreting the subtle signs of prejudice, such as skeptical or disparaging looks. Unless prejudice is overtly expressed, I have to trust my intuitions and then ask the tutee if he is uncomfortable. The attitude problem has to be addressed because the air needs to be cleared before I can function effectively as a tutor and before the tutee can be receptive and benefit from my tutoring.

Therefore, I feel that I should have asked the tutee of my hypothetical session if he felt uncomfortable with my age or my sex. For the sake of tactfulness, I could have posed the question in a quizzical rather than an accusatory tone, and I could have avoided using the word "prejudiced." "Prejudice" is such a strong noun that it may insult the tutee, quickly build his defenses, and end communication.

I could receive one of a myriad of possible responses from the tutee. They could range from empathetic and seemingly truthful to less convincing to startled, challenging responses--for example, "What kind of a question was that?" or "Who do you think you are, challenging my principles?"

Where should I go after receiving some sort of a reply? If my tutee's responses indicated that he may be prejudiced, then I could say that I am not offended, and that I realize that to be stunned by seeing a young tutor is an understandable and very human reaction. I would try to engage the tutee in a discussion about prejudice. Even if past experience has led him to be condescending to females, etc., perhaps I can

build his trust in me as a writing tutor. Also, at some point, I would explain my reason for asking if he were uncomfortable, regardless of what the response was. For example, I might say, "I wanted to talk this over with you and establish a good rapport in order to serve you best."

Whether or not the tutoring session will continue after the problem has been addressed depends on the individuals involved. Also, the success of the session cannot be predicted. All I can do as a tutor is try my best by being as tactful and sensitive to the needs of the tutee as possible.

Elaine Fitzgibbons  
Peer Tutor  
Wheaton College

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#### A READER COMMENTS . . .

We enjoy the Writing Lab Newsletter at The Reading and Writing Center at The College of Wooster. Our staff of paraprofessionals and peer tutors can always find something of interest in each issue. I have incorporated "Tutor's Corner" into my peer tutor training workshop as a way to introduce tutors to the Newsletter. It seems to help them overcome their anxieties about tutoring. (As in other things at Wooster, we have to take shortcuts: there is no tutor-training course, only a five day workshop before the start of the first semester--a grueling initiation, but it's all I am allowed to have.)

Please keep up the good work. I hope we can find time to contribute, but every fall semester is an exhausting time--over 1000 individual appointments during the Fall of 1985--from which we never seem to recover. Why 1000 appointments? Because the college deems freshman composition an unnecessary course for 3/4 of the freshman class; hence, many freshmen are thrown into academic writing--sink or swim--and we are the only resource to help them avert sinking.

Those of us at small colleges, who are often isolated from other writing teachers and tutors--we need a publication like the Newsletter.

Michael Allen  
The College of Wooster  
Wooster, Ohio

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CONFERENCE ANNOUNCEMENT

"WRITING IN THE CENTER: Design, Development, and Direction," the second Pacific Coast Writing Centers Association conference will be held Saturday, October 25, 1986, at the University of Puget Sound, Tacoma, Washington. The Program Committee has accepted papers on issues relevant to writing centers: "Theoretical Concerns of Writing Centers;" "Tutor Training;" "Practical Concerns of Writing Centers;" "Computers in the Writing Center;" "Critical Concerns for Writing Centers;" "Writing Across the Curriculum;" "Techniques for Working with Students;" "Ideas on Writing Programs."

Thom Hawkins, University of California, Berkeley, will give the keynote address, "Peer Response Groups in the Writing Center."

To register for the conference send \$30.00 by October 20th to

Pacific Coast Writing Centers Conference  
University of Puget Sound  
Department of English  
1500 No. Warner  
Tacoma, Washington 98416

The registration fee covers a continental breakfast, lunch, reception, and conference materials.

For more information call or write  
Professor Julie Neff  
(W) 206-756-3213 (H) 206-851-2603  
Department of English  
University of Puget Sound  
1500 North Warner  
Tacoma, Washington 98416

CALL FOR PAPERS  
SOUTHEASTERN WRITING CENTER ASSOCIATION

The theme for the 7th annual conference of the Southeastern Writing Center Association is "The Writing Center: Purpose, Place, Process." The 1987 conference will be held at Marriot's Bay Point Resort in Panama City Beach, Florida, April 9-11. Presentations of 15-20 minutes should address issues such as the following: purpose of the writing center (What should it do? Whom should it serve?); place (Where should it be located? Who should control its activities?); process (What can it do?

How does it operate?). Ideas for conference workshops are also requested and should include a summary of the focus of the workshop, an indication of the time needed, and an identification of special requirements, such as equipment and materials.

A double-spaced, typed summary of the essential content of the presentation (no more than 250 words) should be postmarked no later than January 15, 1987, to Barry Brunetti, The Writing Center, Gulf Coast Community College, 5230 West Highway 98, Panama City, Florida, 32401. Good photocopies are acceptable. Please enclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope if you wish to have your manuscript returned.

A READER ASKS . . . .

I'm happy to report that the Columbus (Ohio) Public School System has approved my proposal for a writing lab at Marion-Franklin High School. One area of concern has been gathering materials for the lab. While we have done well with what is available, I'd certainly like to be able to purchase more materials in the future.

Marion-Franklin's lab will concentrate on remedial work for 9th graders. Columbus uses a grading rubric with ten categories which is mainly used to evaluate a 10th grade writing sample as part of competency testing. The rubric is being introduced at all grade levels as part of composition evaluation, but special emphasis has been placed on making 9th graders familiar with it.

The rubric's ten categories are Ideas, Organization, Intent, Word Choice, Sentence Structure, Usage, Punctuation, Capitalization, Spelling and Neatness. While information about materials on any of these would be helpful, I need materials specifically targeted for the first five categories, which Columbus labels as General Features of writing. Any assistance will be greatly appreciated.

Michael Schoonover  
Marion-Franklin H.S.  
1265 Koebel Road  
Columbus, Ohio 43207

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TELE-NADE: A NADE TELEPHONE  
PLACEMENT SERVICE

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The Placement Committee of the National Association for Developmental Education announces a new telephone placement network, "TELE-NADE," which will start January 1, 1987.

Readers of the Writing Lab Newsletter are encouraged to send notices of job openings for developmental education professionals in higher education to:

Dr. Mildred Steele  
NADE Placement Chair  
Central College  
Pella, Iowa 50219

Job openings should be listed on a form obtainable from Dr. Steele. Requests for a form should be accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope.

TELE-NADE will not charge for listing positions for the first five months of its operation. Job openings will be recorded on tape, updated twice a month, and made available to NADE members who phone TELE-NADE any time of day or night. The four types of college-level developmental positions that will be advertised on TELE-NADE are (1) reading, writing, or study skills; (2) mathematics or science; (3) counseling; and (4) administration.

Job seekers or others who wish to join NADE should send \$20 (or \$25 after January 1, 1987) to Yvonne Carranza, NADE treasurer, Sinclair Community College, 444 W. 3rd Street, Dayton, OH 45402. NADE membership includes the NADE Journal, NADE Newsletter, and other benefits, one of which is TELE-NADE.

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CONTROLLED COMPOSITION:  
PUTTING GRAMMAR IN CONTEXT

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The back-to-basics movement has been with us long enough so that the obvious has become obvious: drills on isolated aspects of grammar do not improve student writing. Composition teachers know that holistic prac-

tice is needed, but there are limits to the time and energy they can expend in responding to original compositions. Free-writing and journal writing are useful, but they do permit the repeated use of nonstandard usage. How can we give students enough practice, and some feedback on acceptable grammar and usage, without burning out the instructor?

The Method of Controlled Composition

At Bakersfield College we have found a partial solution to the paperwork problem while giving our students a great deal of simulated writing practice. In our Learning Skills Lab, and in some basic writing courses as well, we use the method of controlled composition. With this method, students copy well-written short compositions (about 100 to 150 words), changing each one in some meaningful way, such as from present to past, singular to plural, slang to standard English, and so on. Or they may combine selected sentences within the composition to form appositives, compound sentences, adjective clauses, adverbial clauses, etc. They learn the appropriate punctuation in context as they make these changes.

Basically, controlled compositions are a means of learning to write by imitation, but they are not mindless copying. The student must manipulate the passages, thoughtfully, but he or she can concentrate on one concept at a time. Thus even the student who has repeatedly experienced failure can write a perfect paper.

Students should copy the entire passage, not just cross out and replace words. In this way they develop fluency, a sense of continuity, and proofreading skills. If students make more than three errors on one controlled composition (including copying errors), they should either re-do the entire composition or practice the same skill on another controlled composition. Students quickly learn that it is to their advantage to work carefully and to proofread. Moreover, being required to do something over if they don't get it right the first time helps to prepare them for the demands of the workplace. However, students should not have to re-do an exercise more than once. They should move on to more difficult assignments, because the exposure to various other examples of good writing will be more beneficial than tedious repetition.

### Grading

Grading controlled compositions is quick and easy. The instructor (or a lab aide, if you are lucky enough to have one) simply circles any errors and counts them. This may be done in the student's presence, taking one or two minutes, or the instructor can grade an entire class set in about an hour. The student should try to figure out why the circled parts are wrong, learning to analyze for errors in the process. This may involve going back to the directions to see why they were not followed correctly. If the student cannot see what is wrong after making an effort, he or she should of course be told how to improve on the second try. Lab aides or assistants can be trained to grade controlled compositions with a key. In cases where more than one response might be acceptable, the grader should accept any response that makes sense. This kind of help can free the instructor to spend more time on the students' original writing.

### Limitations of the Method

Controlled composition should not be the only kind of writing students do. It should be supplemented with free writing, journal keeping, sentence combining, and above all, original compositions. But once students have been exposed to the good writing in controlled compositions, their original writing improves as they draw upon the patterns and structures they have absorbed. Practice with controlled composition is somewhat analogous to practicing a piano lesson before a performance, the original composition being the performance.

### Effectiveness of the Method

This method is particularly useful with students who may feel overwhelmed with the number of errors they make in original compositions. Those who have read very little, and have only a vague notion of how written sentences differ from speech, find controlled compositions non-threatening. Foreign students, who know their grammar perfectly yet cannot write error-free prose, welcome the opportunity to learn from imitating a composition written in standard English. After the confidence-building practice of controlled compositions, the original writing of these students shows marked improvement. Even the more able students in a basic writing class often enjoy controlled compositions, so the method works well in a class or lab in which there is a wide range of student ability.

To test the effectiveness of this method in reducing errors and increasing fluency, a pilot course in basic writing was conducted using this method plus free writing and clustering (writing original sentences from stimulus words). As measured by essays on uniform topics at the beginning and end of the semester, students in this experimental course reduced their mechanical errors by 43 percent and increased their fluency by 17 percent. A carefully matched group of students studying traditional sentence structure reduced their errors by only 15 percent and did not increase fluency at all. In fact, they wrote, on the average, 10 percent fewer words at the end of the semester than they had at the beginning. (Further details can be found in the author's doctoral dissertation, "A Comparison of Fragmented and Holistic Modes of Instruction in Remedial Writing," ERIC #CCM000134, April 1979.)

### Available Textbooks

Textbooks using the controlled composition approach were reviewed by John A. R. Dick in Teaching English in the Two Year College, May 1985. They include Gordon's From Copying to Creating (Holt, 1985), Gorrell's Copy/Write (Little, 1982), and Gonzales, Cruz, and Thompson's Copy, Combine, and Compose (Wadsworth, 1983). A small and inexpensive book of controlled composition exercises written originally for adult basic education students is Kunz and Viscount's Write Me a Ream (Columbia Teacher's College Press). Two books from Language Innovations, Inc. of New York are designed especially for students of English as a Second Language: Ten Steps, by Brookes and Withrow, for beginning and intermediate ESL students, and Twenty-Six Steps, by Kunz, for intermediate and advanced ESL students.

### Sample Lesson

Here is a sample controlled composition taken from Gordon's From Copying to Creating. At this point in the text, the students have been given a brief lesson in changing from singular to plural forms. Notice that the directions include an example of how the first sentence should be rewritten:

**DIRECTIONS:** Copy the following passage in your own notebook, changing it so it describes more than one person. Remember that several people can have one need. Put a box around each of your changes, proofread the

whole paper to make sure it is consistently plural, and then have your instructor compare your paper to the answer key. Your first sentence, when changed, will look like this:

Competitors see so much competition in American society that they think it is a law of nature.

### THE COMPETITOR

(Adapted from Why Am I Afraid to Tell You Who I Am? by John Powell.)

The competitor sees so much competition in American society that he thinks it is a law of nature. He thinks nothing is more important than winning. He turns everything into a "win or lose" situation. In conversation, he doesn't discuss; he debates and argues. The victories that he seeks, so often at the expense of hurting others, may be intended to make up for a lack of approval in his childhood. His early doubts have left him thinking that he isn't worth much. So he tries to prove his importance by putting others down. His need to be noticed intensifies his drive to get ahead. He becomes angry with anyone who achieves more than he does.

Sooner or later, he will be overcome by a sense of failure, since his appetite for victory becomes harder and harder to satisfy. What he needs to learn is that his own worth is separate from the worth of his achievements. There is room for all kinds of excellence in the world, and other people's achievements take nothing away from his. When he realizes that, he can be pleased with the successes of others, and others will return the respect he gives to them.

### Conclusion

As an alternative to grammar drills in the writing lab, controlled compositions make a positive contribution. Because they teach through the imitation of patterns, as well as requiring simple analysis of sentences, they involve the holistic right hemisphere of the brain as well as the analytical left hemisphere. They do not and cannot obviate the need for students to write original compositions, but they provide relevant and ample practice in observing and applying standard English within a meaningful context.

Helen H. Gordon  
Bakersfield College  
Bakersfield, CA



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