

# The **WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER**

Member of the NWCA:NCTE  
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Vol. XI, No. 4  
(December, 1986)

Recently, after the usual frenzy of a busy morning of tutoring in our Writing Lab, one of our lab instructors, a grad student, sat back and rolled her head around a few times in an effort to unkink tense neck muscles. Why is it, she wondered (when her head stopped rolling), that teaching comp classes is so much easier than tutoring? As we shuffled with our usual paperwork after tutorials, we talked about the intensity of the tutorial, about the need to keep creating interaction and dialog, and about some of the other demands of one-to-one teaching. "So," we confronted each other, "why don't we just retire back to the classroom and relax?" About thirty seconds of quiet filled the air as we worked on that one. Finally, she drained her coffee cup, picked up her student folders, and responded, "Because here in the lab the less I have to act like a teacher, the more I teach."

But however exhausting and exhilarating tutoring is, we all have some vacation time--and some holidays approaching. Here's wishing all us all happy holidays, a prosperous and peaceful new year, and labfuls of students to work with in the coming year.

And when you do get back to your desk, please keep sending your articles, announcements, queries, reviews, names of new members, and those much appreciated \$7.50 yearly donations (in checks made payable to Purdue University and sent to me) to:

Muriel Harris, editor  
Writing Lab Newsletter  
Dept. of English  
Purdue University  
West Lafayette, IN 47907

Convincing message in the Detroit  
*Free Press*:

U.S. SCHOOLS ARE GETTING  
DESPERATE FOR TEACHERS,  
UNION LEADER WARNS

From The Chronicle of Higher Education  
(July 30, 1986)

## EVALUATING WRITING CENTERS: A SURVEY REPORT

Writing center directors are pretty good at doing what administrators are supposed to do. We evaluate and report furiously. Few of us ignore the device of the annual report or the evaluation. In fact, most by far do these things. We almost all keep track of the hours tutored in our centers and the number of students who come to the center in a year. The other data vary in how we handle them, but we do handle them and keep track of our activities. We have even learned to toot our horns pretty vigorously. A few of us even bring in outside evaluators to observe what we do and report our needs and triumphs to the powers that be in our schools. We have learned how to be effective administrators in the fifteen or twenty years that writing centers have been vital parts of most colleges and universities and of many high schools.

Many articles have appeared on evaluation, evaluation tied to the administration of centers. Mary Lamb's article in New Directions in College Learning Centers and mine in Tutoring Writing, as well as the many report sheets and record keeping suggestions in Stewart and Croft's The Writing Laboratory, have all directed the beginning writing center administrator toward the sensible way of keeping track and reporting writing center activities. The main thrust of these articles has been to count everything and get involved in many kinds of tutoring, then report the results to as many important people on and off campus as possible. We have been very good at showing that we are busy, not a hard task given the nature of our work. If one will set up a free service that improves grades and offers a quiet, well-lighted place with freely flowing coffee, it is likely that the place will be busy. The question is, of course, whether we can prove that we do what we know we do.

Steve North in his essay on research in writing centers says that we do not have a unified approach to confirming the theory we all believe: that the individual tutorial is the best way to teach writing and that intervening in the writer's process will change that process for the better. North then goes on to suggest methods of research that may confirm that fondly held theory.

He makes three basic suggestions. First, taping sessions to discover what has happened in the tutorial and to follow up on the effects of the tutorial methods. Second, developing a good tutor/poor tutor research design to study methods and attitudes in good and not so good tutors from several different centers. Finally, he suggests training drop-in students to learn to do protocols as they are tutored and as they work. The researcher would then put these protocols together with pre- and post-tests to discover which students improve using which strategies. North notes that we have an ideal protocol situation in the writing center because we have the individual student whom we can study in a situation where she is able to be observed and interacted with in a way that would be impossible in a writing class.

These suggestions are all valuable and build on a basic recommendation made by Harvey Kail and Kay Allan in their essay on research in Tutoring Writing. Their recommendation is to keep it simple. Any of us who have been entangled in long and complex research studies can appreciate this advice. The authors go on to suggest case studies, surveys, and simple, but carefully designed, comparative studies. They then describe a research project in process in their center, the comparison of silent and reading aloud proofreaders. The purpose of the study is to see whether our assumptions about reading aloud really are true. Does it make a difference if a person is able to hear as well as see the text? At the time of writing, the research was not complete, but the indications were that our assumptions about proofreading are probably correct.

Another article on research in writing centers appeared some years ago in New Directions in Teaching Writing, but it deserves mention if for no other reason than that it is a review of relevant research that may offer designs for researchers. Aviva Freedman surveyed the studies in writing that are similar to those that could

be done in learning centers and that lead to conclusions on which writing centers might begin new research or on whose design the research could be molded. She mentions theorists like Sondra Perl and Nancy Sommers whose research was not complex in design in that it used a limited number of subjects and worked from papers produced by students in classes or labs. Freedman's suggestions for future research resemble those made by North, Kail, and Allan.

At the 1985 CCCC Joyce Kinkead reported a research project that picks up two threads from these articles. She did case studies not on students but on tutors. The gist of the results was that female tutors tend to be more interactive, less directive, and more able to sit on their hands and listen than male tutors. She suggested that the implications for tutor training are that one must be careful to help male tutors learn to listen and not appropriate the student's paper. Her sample was narrow, and we know that one cannot legitimately generalize from case studies, but they do give direction for further research and also hints about the nature of the tutoring process.

In my own center I have been doing longitudinal research that ties into several research projects being pursued in the English department at Illinois State. Three years ago, two colleagues and I began to pull all the placement test papers of students with ACTE scores above 25 (about 200) and a random sample of two hundred other students' placement tests (the total number of tests each summer ranges around 3800 at Illinois State). These students' papers were then placed on file and used as the basis for several research projects. We interviewed the students with scores above 25 to see what factors in their backgrounds led to their writing and editing skills. We used the characteristics of the random sample to provide norms for another research study that linked to a high school/college articulation project in which we participated for two years. We followed students in the sample as they used the center, and we finally compared their initial scores with their writing center use, their grades, and their reported precollege experiences to develop a profile of the sorts of students who begin as good writers and/or who become good writers in college.

One other research study has been both praised and widely read, Muriel Harris's

"Mending the Fragmented Free Modifier." Originally published in CCC in May of 1981, the essay is reprinted in Graves' Rhetoric and Composition: A Sourcebook for Teachers and Writers (1984). In this essay Harris uses error analysis to discover the underlying causes for fragments appearing as free modifiers unattached after main clauses. The brilliance of the article is that it is one of the few to put into practice Shaughnessy's theories about error as a guide to growth. In the article Harris shows how we can use this particular kind of error to gauge progress on the student's part. She also uses the error as a caveat against big red "frag" marks that discourage experimentation.

This article is particularly helpful in showing tutors how error should not be criticized but should be used as a sign of risk taking and growth on the part of the student. I always extrapolate from the article to a whole set of attitudes toward student writing. These attitudes may be best described in Shaughnessy's 1977 article, "Diving In," but they are best illustrated in Harris's approach in "Mending the Fragmented Free Modifier."

The other area of central concern is testing which kinds of tutoring work best in which situations. This research ties in with case study research and with studies of small group interactions. So far no one has reported a study quite like the one Stephen North describes in which tutors from various schools are compared for quality and the characteristics that lead to quality. Such a study seems ready made for an interschool grant proposal. Other current writing center research is summarized at the end of this paper with the report of a questionnaire I distributed in 1985. The research focuses on the areas already mentioned with an extra emphasis on the use of computers in teaching writing.

National Writing Center Association  
Questionnaire Results

Following are the results of the survey which I mailed to writing center directors in the late spring of 1985. Additional information offered in the responses is also included. The numbers in the slots indicate numbers of responses to that item.

1. Do you evaluate your center each quarter? 9, semester 39, year 29, other     , no 6.
2. Do you write an annual report? Yes 69  
No 16 No. of pages: 1-5 45 6-10 10  
11-15 10 over 15 4.
3. Which records do you keep for your report?  
-Total hours tutored 78 yearly average 46 (from 200-33,600)  
-Number of students tutored 78 yearly average 46 (from 90-5000)  
-Sex of students tutored 14  
-Number of native and non-native tutored 33  
-Types of aid given 62  
-Departments served 66  
-Number of visits 4  
-Minority students using center 3  
-Major of students using center 3  
-Referrals and drop-ins to center 12  
-Reason for coming 2  
-Promotional activities of center staff 2  
-Years out of college of students using center 1  
-Word processor use 3  
-Grammar hotline calls 3  
-Referring professors and/or classes 13  
-Tutor training activities 2
4. How do you keep records?  
By hand 76 By computer 28 By computer in 1986 3 (Many use both)
5. Do you ask students to fill out evaluations? Yes 65 No 20
6. Do tutors evaluate their experiences? Yes 65 No 20
7. Do you or your tutors write case studies of students who use your center/lab? Yes 20 No 65
8. Do you or other faculty use your center/lab for writing research? Yes 31 No 54 Plan to soon 7 (Descriptions of the research are listed below)
9. Do you bring in external consultants or evaluators? Yes 18 No 67 How often? Answers ranged from "occasionally" to every quarter to every 9 years. Evaluators are

often English faculty.

10. Who reads your evaluation/report?
- English department chairperson 59
  - Dean 56
  - Provost's office 22
  - Others (fewer than 3 responses for any one): Community, Chairperson, Trustees, Tutors, Study Skills Center Director, President, State Funding Agency, Vocational Education Director, Student Affairs VP, Academic Affairs VP, Chancellor, Committee on Planning Education Support Services, Faculty Committee, Advisory Committee to Senate, Director of Educational Opportunities Program.

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Types of Research Reported (from 8 above):

- Trying out new methods of group teaching (Gilda Kelsey, U. of Delaware, Newark)
- Use of microcomputer (Evelyn Posey, UT, El Paso)
- Tutoring in various combinations to improve tutoring
- Research centering on "naturalistic" methods of examining the language of collaborative learning (Harvey Kail, U. of Maine, noted that he had done quantitative research in the past with little satisfaction.)
- Training of peer tutors to work with hearing-impaired students (Ellen Mohr, Johnson County CC, Overland Park, Kansas)
- The tutoring stance: What kinds of questions elicit what kinds of responses from students? How do sex roles influence tutoring?
- The role of word processing and text analysis in the writing process (Joyce Kinkead, Utah State, Logan)
- Writing topics, information in general about grammar (Louise Webb, DeKalb CC, Clarkston, GA)
- Hypothesis testing (Dan Schwartz, SUNY, Buffalo)
- Computer use by faculty for various research projects (Marva Tanner, Seminole CC, Sanford, Florida)
- Research in forthcoming articles (Muriel Harris, Purdue U.)
- An on-going evaluative/qualitative ethnographic study for four years: Tutors keep logs of their small group writing workshop interactions, each

group meeting twice a week for a semester. Variables studied are group size, tutor-student role relationships, ESL/native speaker differences in writing and learning, and the influence of affective factors on learning. A book is in process illustrating findings based on patterns in 150 research logs. The logs are supplemented with attitude and anxiety (WAT) surveys, with questionnaires, with audio and video tapes, and with analysis of student drafts. (Marie Wilson, George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia)

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Janice Neuleib  
Illinois State Univ.  
Normal, IL

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WRITING CENTERS IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS:  
AN IDEA BEYOND THE PUBERTY STAGE

Ten years ago I encountered my first writing center. I was teaching freshman composition to students whose entering credentials were shaky. I saw them in class three times a week and--because of their deficient skills--they were scheduled for "extra help" twice a week in the writing lab. Sound familiar? Although I have not formally studied the history and development of writing centers across the country, I would guess that my first experience was as typical as any of college writing centers ten years ago.

Perhaps I should tell you that I'm one of those modern wives who has followed a husband from state to state. Consequently, my experience with--and exposure to--college writing centers is based on teaching at four universities in two states. Three years ago I returned to the "real world" of the public high school--and have helped design and implement a writing center there, a center which recently received NCTE's Center of Excellence award.

Writing centers in secondary schools might be described as the next generation, as descendants of, college centers. The idea for secondary centers came from the success of college centers. I would like to suggest that secondary writing centers are now growing up--passing puberty, as the title goes--into young, but strong and optimistic, centers able to handle well the task of improving student writing.

Fortunately, high school centers have benefited immensely from observing the successes and the mistakes of college models. We learned, for instance, that there were a variety of college models to choose from, that colleges had set up, according to one researcher, "places as theoretically and functionally diverse as programmed materials-and-tapes labs; peer tutoring drop-in centers; wholesale sentence-combining labs; so-called remedial centers staffed by professional tutors; and so on up to what might be called the full service center" (North 27). Sometimes, it seemed, writing centers were used to teach almost anything and everything. At any rate, as we designed secondary centers, we discovered that we had choices to make as to

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CALL FOR PAPERS

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Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville is hosting its Seventh Annual Composition Conference on March 14, 1987. The topic of this year's symposium is "The Art of Being a Writing Teacher." Author of Through Teacher's Eyes, Sondra Perl of Lehman College of CUNY, will be the keynote speaker. We need papers and workshop proposals focusing on techniques and insights designed to aid writing teachers of all levels understand and utilize a writing-as-process approach. Send 1 page description of presentation by December 12, 1986 to:

Linda Barnes, Chair  
SIUE COMPOSITION CONFERENCE  
Dept. of English Language & Literature  
Southern Illinois Univ. at Edwardsville  
Edwardsville, IL 62060  
(618) 692-2179/692-2060

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what model would work best.

We also learned that college centers struggled for funding and for recognition and sometimes even struggled with their relationship with the English Department. Sometimes there was disagreement within the department as to the role and operation of the center, and occasionally the English Department seemed more like the enemy than the supporter and protector of the writing center. We in the secondary schools certainly hoped to avoid this discouraging dilemma.

We learned another crucially important lesson from the painful experiences of many college labs that were initially set up as remediation centers. Their motives were admirable, of course, but we decided that high school students, like their college counterparts, might stay away in droves if we focused solely on remediation.

On the positive side, surely the most important lesson we learned from college writing centers is that the conference method is the best, most effective way to teach writing. We caught the enthusiasm of Donald Murray and Donald Graves, who so persuasively advocated teaching writing one-to-one. Students learn more when their writing gets individual attention focusing on particular strengths and weaknesses, and we in secondary schools wanted the opportunity to give that individual attention.

Even as we learned from the college successes and failures, we also discovered that the public high school has its own set of unique, additional challenges to meet and obstacles to overcome. For example, most high schools have a tight daily schedule which locks students into a routine that seldom allows them to "drop in" to a writing center. When students have a seven-period day, sometimes with no study halls, we asked whether one-to-one help in a writing center was even a remote possibility.

Not only do the students have rigid schedules, but teachers do as well. We don't have the luxury of office hours at intervals throughout the day or classes staggered on alternating days with time in between to see students individually. Often public school teachers have six classes a day with one fifty-minute period for preparation and conferences (yes, the stuff of college professors' nightmares!).

Student load? Sometimes thirty plus per class. Paper load? If we believe that students learn to write by writing, consider 180 students five days a week, all busy writing papers for their teachers to read! What teacher faced with such a daily grind could spare attention to be lavished in a writing center on one student at a time?

Staffing, we found, can be another enormous problem for the public high school. To school administrators, who believe six classes a day is a reasonable load, the idea of staffing a writing center can be almost impossible to sell.

What a bleak picture. Fortunately, many of the obstacles can be overcome and the challenges met.

The first hurdle--and it's a big one--is to get administrators and school board members willing to make a commitment to the concept of a writing center. I can testify to the fact that there are school districts willing to spend money to provide a writing center. At Madeira High School we discovered that casual, after-school conversations led to conversations with administrators about what we needed in order to teach writing more effectively. We combined our request for a writing center with a request for a reduced class load and class size. Amazingly enough, our administrators listened! They said to us, teach four classes a day and use two periods a day to be available to give "writing assistance" in a writing center. In addition, they said, we'll give you an average class size of twenty. And yes, this meant hiring additional English teachers. (I do believe, because of the heavy load and schedule, a strong case can be made that high schools need writing centers even more than the universities.)

If our schedule sounds too good to be true, I should point out that we're not alone. There are a variety of other secondary programs with slight variations throughout the country. In fact, I found one which gave each English teacher three classes a day, with the rest of the schedule being filled with 25-minute-long individual conferences.

At Madeira we created a center and staffed it by using regular classroom teachers, who would do conferencing with students who came or were sent for assist-

ance. In other high school programs, of course, some centers use trained peer tutors, others use a full-time teacher whose job is to staff the center.

Another hurdle involved time in students' schedules to use the center. At our school many of our students have a study hall. We set up a referral system which allows students to come to our center during study hall period (our center is located in a small conference room adjacent to the Media Center--which is the hub of our campus).

Again, other programs have used other means to see students. Some schools which have few or no study halls use a pull-out system where students are allowed to leave their English class occasionally to work in the center. Others staff the center before and after school. Actually, in one respect we may have an advantage over most college centers as far as generating drop-ins. In the high school our students are required to be on campus all day, and the center isn't two blocks away. Perhaps, then, students may need less incentive to drop in--when we're not competing with the afternoon soaps.

One of the benefits of reflecting on college experiences is that we made sure that our center was designed by those of us who run the English Department and who teach the English classes. At Madeira, during the summer which preceded the beginning of our center, three of us from our small English Department attended the Ohio Writing Project at Miami University. As we drove to Oxford together everyday, we talked and dreamed and planned together. The following summer the remaining members of the department attended the Writing Project, so that our teachers who staff the center all share basically a similar pedagogy.

We decided that the major purpose of our center would be to offer a place where writing is treated as a process, a process which can benefit from intervention by, and discussion with, a trained reader-responder-advisor. We decided that the teacher as "writing consultant" was the model we wanted to use. We wanted to work with students of all ability levels to allow them to understand their own writing process. We wanted to provide students with a "mirror" and a "spark," i.e., a mirror reflecting to the student the substance and spirit of his writing and a spark generating new ideas and

possibilities. We wanted to do remediation work as well, using the student's writing itself to show patterns of error and to discuss possible corrections.

Surely we've learned from the college experiences that just getting a center funded and staffed does not guarantee success. We had to train our teacher-tutors to know how to do conferences well so that the students maintained ownership of the writing and were nudged to think for themselves. We had to assess our effectiveness. We had to publicize to students and parents and administrators our successes. We had to seek ways to improve.

Secondary writing centers, then, face severe problems in becoming a reality, but, once established, I believe they hold great promise. One student response tells the tale: "The teacher was able to bring ideas out of my head without telling me directly what to write my paper on. She was then able to help me put my ideas in an order that would best fit the paper . . . in a final sense, the teacher was able to make me work to get my ideas down on paper."

We hope to continue growing and someday be like our more successful college ancestors--wise and mature and effective. (We also hope to avoid the fate of our less fortunate college predecessors--those who have died off or become a bit senile and useless.) I look forward to the future when college centers will welcome freshmen who have already come to know in high school how beneficial it is to seek out the "writing consultants" who can facilitate the writing process.

Ellen H. Brinkley  
Madeira High School  
Cincinnati, Ohio

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North, Stephen. "Writing Center Research: Testing Our Assumptions." Writing Centers. Ed. Gary Olson. Urbana: NCTE, 1984.

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A recently observed bumper sticker:

DYSLEXICS UNTIE!

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EXPLAINING THE "D" ON BARBECUED CHICKEN

While they may be difficult for many student writers to remember, the past tense -ed and the -s endings on singular verbs and plural nouns are relatively easy to explain. It is more difficult to explain the frequently omitted -d on words like "barbecued" that actually are verbal adjectives in the form of past participles. I have written a two-page handout presenting this type of word using non-technical explanation and examples of participles with both -d or -ed endings and -n or -en endings. Adjectives describing processes used on foods are good examples (baked, boiled, mixed, salted, tenderized). My explanation includes this sequence: (1) The movers have damaged the sofa. (2) The sofa was damaged. (3) The damaged sofa is in the hall. These sentences demonstrate that the adjective "damaged" is derived from a verb, and that it shows the consequences of the action in sentence (1). In addition, other adjectives are discussed that are derived from nouns. In these, the -ed ending means "full of or characterized by" (examples: pot-bellied, over-sized, thin-skinned).

If you would like a copy of this handout, please send a stamped, self-addressed envelope to:

Dr. Pamela S. Saur  
Dept. of English  
Auburn University at Montgomery  
Montgomery, AL 36193

(P.S. If you have a favorite handout to share, send it too!)

THE KELLOGG INSTITUTE SUMMER SESSION

The 1987 Kellogg Institute for the Training and Certification of Developmental Educators will hold its summer session from June 27 through July 24 on the campus of Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina.

The 1987 Kellogg Institute will train faculty, counselors and administrators from remedial, developmental, and learning assistance programs in the most current techniques for promoting learning improvement. The Institute program consists of a summer session followed by a fall term practicum project on the home campuses of the participants. The summer program will focus on the use of learning styles and their implications for instruction, the process of developing evaluation activities, the use of academic intervention and coun-

seling techniques, the management of programs and classes, and the use of computers for management, data collection, and instructional purposes.

For applications contact Ms. Elaine L. Bingham, Assistant Director of the National Center for Developmental Education, Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina 28608. Additional information may be obtained from Dr. Hunter R. Boylan (704) 262-3057. The application deadline is April 1, 1987.

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The Territory of Language: Linguistics, Stylistics, and the Teaching of Composition, by Donald McQuade. Southern Illinois University Press (P.O. Box 3697, Carbondale, Illinois 62902), 1986, \$24.95 cloth, \$15.95 paper.

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This is a new, revised, and expanded version of the book that became an "underground classic" in the world of composition. McQuade provides reports by many of America's most eminent writers on significant research and theory in composition, as well as methods of effectively teaching writing to the current generation of students.

This collection of essays is divided into three parts: "Mapping the Territory," "Exploring the Language," and "Teaching the Connections." Included are essays by David Bartholomae, Kenneth Bruffee, Edward P.J. Corbett, Elaine Maimon, Joseph Williams, Ann Berthoff, James Kinneavy, Ross Winterowd, Richard Young, Sandra Schor, and others.

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CALL FOR NEWSLETTER EXCHANGE

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The Boise State Writing Center publishes a newsletter for all faculty on campus. The newsletter explains the services of the Center and publishes articles about writing across the curriculum.

We would like to set up an exchange of in-house newsletters with other writing centers, in order to share articles and ideas. We would be willing to maintain a master mailing list of newsletters for anyone who would like to join an exchange network.

If interested, write to Richard Leahy, Department of English, Boise State University, Boise, Idaho 83725.

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# The Tutor's Corner

## CONFESSIONS OF A WRITING CENTER TUTOR: HOW FEAR ALMOST KEPT ME FROM GETTING INVOLVED

I've been working in the Writing Center at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock for three semesters now, so I guess it would be logical to assume that I feel pretty comfortable about helping Writing Center clients with their writing. I only wish that were true. Since the beginning I've wrestled with this fear that during a conference I might freeze and have nothing to say to a client--or worse--say the wrong thing and alienate him or her from the Writing Center.

As time has gone by, I've felt more at ease and maybe even better equipped to handle conferences, but every now and then when I think about what I'm doing, that old fear creeps in and reminds me that I'm not infallible.

Fear is a nasty little critter designed to keep you from involving yourself wholeheartedly in an experience. As I worked with Writing Center clients, it made me take short-cuts in my work and kept me functioning at minimum capacity. I have been so afraid of going one-to-one at times that I've been tempted to acquiesce and send a client to someone else to work with.

One-to-one relationships with clients made me realize the fear that I was going to have to share a piece of myself with another person. What made that fear worse was the fact that the other person was going to be a total stranger. In order to keep from throwing in the towel, I had to tell myself, "be persistent." Lucky for me, I happen to have a pretty hard head.

The first semester I worked in the Writing Center, fear was my worst enemy. Janice, the first woman I worked with in a conference, was having some minor grammar problems, though she believed her problems were worse than they really were. The director of the Writing Center told me to start her on timed writings, and the woman questioned that move. "Why are you making me do this?" she asked me. I didn't know how to answer the question. "Trust me," I kept saying to her, but I wasn't even sure I trusted myself. I had been taught advanced

heuristics and techniques in upper level writing courses, but I wasn't sure I could put them into use to do someone else some good. I just couldn't get over the fear that I would fail to help, and maybe even do harm.

Even though I worked at a slow time during the day, every experience after that in the Writing Center that semester was scary. But I had determination and stuck it out. I don't like unfinished business.

The next fall, the Writing Center moved to a bigger location on campus and obtained 16 Apple IIe computers with word processing capability. It was a new beginning for the center and for me. I decided that I was going to get to the root of my fear and beat it. That attitude was all well and good, but I had to face facts: fear is not an easy enemy to conquer. It has a way of sneaking up on you when you're not looking. I had also found myself avoiding the fear instead of facing up to it.

I learned how to word process and from that gained confidence in showing clients how to word process. Most of the work that semester was a cinch because even though the Writing Center was getting busier, most of the clients were coming to word process. So, I rarely went one-to-one with anybody. The computers seemed like a way out, but instead of being relieved, I felt cheated. The feeling that I wasn't making a significant contribution kept eating away at me.

I had already completed three hours of internship in the Writing Center, so I couldn't sign up again. Our director asked if I wanted to work for pay the next semester, but since I was graduating, I was sure my schedule would be tight.

As it turned out I had an hour between classes on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, and I found myself wandering into the Writing Center for--well--I wasn't exactly sure what for at the time. When the director again suggested I work for her, I agreed.

That was what I needed, and I knew it. I

hadn't gotten over my fear of working with students on a one-to-one basis, and I wanted another chance to try. Right away I was given a challenge. His name was Michael, and he had failed the writing proficiency exam necessary to graduate. The exam is an essay that students have two hours to write. Michael had only managed two or three pages on previous attempts in that time, and his theme tended to wander. With graduation breathing down his neck, this time he had to pass.

Needless to say, I was petrified. All I could think of was that this guy wasn't going to pass again, and it would be all my fault. My fault. The first day Michael and I worked together, the director talked me through it. I started him on timed writings based on questions from past proficiency exams. It was rough going at first. He would write a little, without much improvement, and I would panic. I wasn't helping, I thought.

Then something happened. One day Michael came in and we just started talking. He told me what his interests were and what he wanted to do when he got out of college. He turned out to be a pretty congenial guy. I couldn't believe it. I was still unsure of myself and the techniques, but I was beginning to feel comfortable with him. We moved on to looping, and he began to get more down on the page. Finally, I had him put it all together and create a paper. It was no masterpiece, but it was a definite improvement.

Michael took the writing proficiency exam last Saturday, and as of yet, the results are not in. I can't say for certain whether he passed. All I can do now is hope for him. I couldn't take the exam for him. That was his responsibility, and that's what all writing tutors need to be aware of. Though we are here to help, we can't do the work for the clients; we can only show them a better way to do it. And hope is also an important part. After the work is done, we can hope the help we have given clients will do some good, and trust in ourselves that we have something worth offering, no matter how well versed we are in the skills of writing.

As for the fear, I don't think it ever goes away. As a tutor and a writer, I will always experience a little bit of the fear and uncertainty that I could do better, and, of course, I can. I have resolved my fear

in part by realizing that I will never have all the answers. The result is like good fiction. The resolution doesn't always give the answers to all the problems; it just lets a little light shine on them.

Martha Tanner  
Writing Center intern  
University of Arkansas  
at Little Rock

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### WHAT IS THE ASSIGNMENT?

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When an English Composition student comes to The Writing Lab for help in revising an unsatisfactory paper, I usually find it helpful to ask what the assignment for that paper is. The fall semester's assignments, given to students taking the first composition course, are often relatively simple, so that once the student writer really focuses his or her efforts on answering that specific assignment, the student can revise his or her work to produce an acceptable result. However, spring semester brings longer, more complex, and more abstract assignments. The vocabulary is more difficult, and the concepts are harder to grasp. Simply stating or restating the assignment was not enough to enable three of my tutees this semester to resolve the problems in their writing. They needed help not only with what the assignment said, but also with what it meant.

Each of these tutees had misread or misunderstood a word in an assignment given by a classroom teacher. As a result, their minds had gone off in unfruitful directions. Restating the assignment, trying to clarify the main idea of the paper, reorganizing the statements--none of these was adequate in these cases to make the writing conform to the assignment. I know these approaches didn't work because I tried them in various ways for much of each session before I began to perceive the true sources of the writers' difficulties. I, as a tutor, had perceived these problems as writing problems, but actually the difficulty had occurred in the students' minds before any writing had taken place.

Jim came to the Lab to get help deciding which of five assignments to pick. I asked him to read them out loud, and he read, "Write a natural paragraph describing a person, place, thing, or event." Hunh?

After he read this several times, I looked at the book myself and saw that it said "neutral," not "natural." Jim looked "neutral" up and seemed to understand it. But he had an additional intellectual difficulty with this assignment; he was supposed to write three paragraphs on the "same" person, place, thing, or event; one neutral paragraph, one positive, and one negative. He kept asking, "The same as what?" He finally decided that "same" meant the same as the topic of the previous assignment printed on that page of the textbook, but as this topic wasn't about a person, place, thing, or event, Jim was lost. I tried to get him to see that he was supposed to pick the topic himself, and that the three different paragraphs were supposed to be on the same topic as each other. It's remarkably difficult to overcome a misconception like Jim's. The paper that Jim wrote at home for this assignment wasn't really three different versions of the "same" event. Instead, it described three parts of a family vacation; the vacationers' attitudes changed, but the writer's neutral stance didn't.

My next tutee, John, had written a long, detailed paper on maglev transportation. It was returned for revision by his teacher because it had "too many facts." John was puzzled by this criticism because he felt it vital to explain the physics of the barcoded guidance system. The assignment for this paper had been to write about a "controversy." John maintained firmly that his description of the engineering needed to guide an international maglev transportation system was a controversy, because the system would be difficult to produce.

It was quite far into the hour before I thought of introducing the definition of "controversy" into the discussion. Once the idea of a human quarrel or disagreement entered John's consciousness, he saw that his paper didn't fit into that category. "What I've got here is science fiction. Do you want me to throw it away?" I asked him if he wanted to throw it away, and he said no. So we talked about possible ways to alter the introduction and conclusion. Who would oppose maglev trains? Why? How could John counter their arguments? John said, "What you're doing is just setting this up differently." This was a perceptive comment; we were trying to present the same material as a controversy by "setting it up differently."

Patty's definition problem was more subtle, and harder to recognize, even though she began the tutoring session with the statement, "I don't understand what this word means." She was pointing to the word "meaningful" in a comment written in the top corner of her in-class essay entitled "The Significance of the Title, 'The Jilting of Granny Weatherall.'" The comment said, "This essay needs to be written in a more meaningful manner." The big red D in the other corner of the essay indicated the teacher's negative reaction--what could the comment mean? It's at moments like these that tutors panic.

Furthermore, the teacher had corrected a dialect verb form in the first sentence of the paper, although the most important problem was that the sentence was jumbled. Indeed, the sentence needed to be written in a more meaningful manner, but Patty assumed that the dialect problem was the meaning problem as she connected the teacher's comment with the correction of the verb form.

Backing up from this confusion, I asked Patty to read her whole paper out loud. It was not clear at all. However, the teacher had asked Patty to do an out-of-class revision, so I began helping Patty straighten her ideas out and express them clearly.

This process was not a particularly smooth one, although Patty seemed to have read "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall" pretty carefully and to have empathized with Granny's feelings. As I encouraged revision, Patty kept retelling the events of Granny's death. Finally I asked Patty, "But why is the story called 'The Jilting of Granny Weatherall'?" Blankness. Then I asked Patty to look again at the title of her essay, "The Significance of the Title . . . ." Patty said, after some thought, "I really don't know what that is, but that's what we had to write about."

The meaning of the word "significance" had apparently eluded Patty, so I asked her to define it. She said, "importance." When she looked it up in the dictionary, her eyes widened. Substituting "meaning" for "importance" brought the assigned topic to life in her mind. It's pretty hard to write about the importance of a title, but explaining why the story is entitled "Jilting" is much easier.

Suddenly Patty's tangled sentences came unglued. It strikes me as ironic that the definition of "meaningful" was the initial task of this tutorial session, but it took most of the hour for me to perceive that a mis-definition of "significance" had thrown Patty's prose off the track. Students would write more meaningfully if they could, if they only knew what it was they were trying to mean. In the case of Patty's assignment, a title is a sign, and the sign has meaning, or significance. Trying to describe this abstraction, meaning, is a better way to generate an essay than trying to explain the much vaguer idea of "importance."

In all these sessions, the tutees would have made progress faster if these misunderstandings had been cleared up sooner. I now try to make sure that students I'm tutoring are really clear on the meanings of the words in their assignments before I consider what revision advice to give them.

Ruth Dean  
University of Akron

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### COMPUTERS AND COMPOSITION

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COMPUTERS AND COMPOSITION is a journal devoted to exploring the uses of computers in writing classes, writing programs, and writing research. The aim of our publication is to provide a forum for discussing issues connected with computer use. We also hope to offer information about integrating computers into writing programs on the basis of sound theoretical and pedagogical decisions, and empirical evidence.

COMPUTERS AND COMPOSTION welcomes articles, reviews, and letters to the editors that may be of interest to its readers. Recommended topics for feature articles include descriptions of computer-aided writing and/or reading instruction; discussions of topics related to computer use or software development; explorations of controversial ethical, legal, or moral issues related to using computers in writing programs; discussions of how computers affect form and content for written dis-

course, the process by which this discourse is produced, or the impact this discourse has on an audience.

Institutional subscriptions are \$20/year, and personal subscriptions are \$8/year. To subscribe, contact COMPUTERS AND COMPOSITION, Humanities Dept., Michigan Technological University, Houghton, MI 49931. (906)482-2447.

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### CONSULTANTS AVAILABLE

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In response to a request for names of people willing to serve as writing lab consultants, Eileen Evans has volunteered to be listed "as a lab director willing to provide consulting and inservice training for new, growing, and mature post-secondary labs." For further information, contact her as follows:

Eileen B. Evans  
Writing Lab 1044 Moore Hall  
Western Michigan University  
Kalamazoo, MI 49008-3899

Phone: (616) 383-8122 (W)  
(616) 327-5531 (H)

In addition, the following people have expressed interest in acting as consultants to prospective lab directors. They describe themselves as "more experienced with post-secondary writing labs." The following people will serve as contacts:

Margaret P. Hassert, Director  
Gilda T. Kelsey, Asst. Director  
University Writing Center  
University of Delaware  
Newark, DE 19716

Phone: (302) 451-1168

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### WRITING APPREHENSION AND ASSURANCE

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During my first semester as an assistant in the Tarleton State University Writing Laboratory, I discovered one important reason that personal one-to-one contact is so important when tutoring students. That reason, I believe, is that freshman students need assurance. They are afraid of the newness of university life, and they have

apprehension about writing and professors. They need to talk to someone associated with the university about their fears, but in many cases, students believe the instructor is unapproachable outside of class. Traditional gossip about professors causes them to fear rejection or a sarcastic remark about their ignorance if they attempt to ask questions. Often instructors simply do not have the time to give individual instruction. As a lab assistant, I represent the university, but generate a less intimidating persona for students, so their worry about overstepping boundaries is not as crucial.

At our university, a large group of freshman students are required to take a basic writing course which includes a spelling program. Since the spelling program is set up in the Writing Laboratory as a self-study process, it offers the lab assistant a chance for frequent contact with students during the semester. For example, before a student begins the spelling program, he must take a diagnostic test which enables the instructor to identify his specific weaknesses in spelling. One student, Brian, was so nervous about test taking, he was physically shaking as I started to administer the test. Instead of continuing the test, we stopped and talked about why he was so scared of a simple test. He revealed that while he was in elementary school and high school, his parents pressured him to always be the best and to make the highest grades in his class. Therefore, he tried constantly to achieve perfection. He was apprehensive about missing even a single word on the spelling test. Even though there was no pressure of grading or fear of failing since the test was used strictly as a diagnostic aid, the student felt he had to perform adequately in the lab or he would be failed in the class. After assuring him that only his best effort was required and that the writing lab was here to help him with his problems, not create new ones, he relaxed and made satisfactory progress during the semester.

Foreign students especially need to be assured that they can successfully participate in university classes. One-to-one conferences allow foreign students to read their rough drafts aloud and thus give them practice speaking the English language. Reading aloud helps them discover their strengths and weaknesses and enables the tutor to diagnose problems at the same time. Many foreign students who attend our insti-

tion may be able to communicate adequately in either the spoken or written language, but not both. English sentence structure, wording, and usage are sometimes confusing, but idiomatic expressions confuse and embarrass them. For example, a graduate business student from Taiwan asked me to explain the meaning of "you bet." She had said "thank you" to another student and his reply was "you bet." She was too embarrassed to ask him what he meant, but felt she could come to the lab for assistance.

Often the more advanced writers suffer from writing anxieties. They need to be assured that they are capable of writing a well organized answer to an essay exam in history or a graduate level research paper. Extra time is usually required to help advanced writers because their problems/questions are more complex. For example, Syd was sent to the writing lab because his major professor wanted him to become more proficient in using the active voice in his writing. Somehow, he had acquired the idea that all papers should be written in the passive voice; therefore, he had neglected the active voice even to the point of failure to recognize it. Most of the verbs in his sentences were passive, resulting in dull, uninteresting papers. After several discussions on active and passive voice and numerous exercises, he was able to understand the difference it would make in his writing. He was capable of writing a good paper on a complex subject, but he needed a little instruction and constant reassurance that his writing would be dynamic and informative.

I am starting my second semester as an assistant in the writing laboratory, and it has been my experience so far that many students who come for help have two problems--weaknesses in writing and anxieties which generate apprehension about writing. As a writing lab assistant in a tutorial situation, I have the opportunity to help in correcting errors and to help in alleviating some of the anxieties about writing. Once the student learns that the writing laboratory is a place he can go for personal assurance as well as writing help, he tends to come back for further assistance.

Sandra Beaty  
Tarleton State Univ.  
Stephenville, TX

**JOB ANNOUNCEMENT**

Funded position: Director of Writing Center. Permanent NON-TENURE TRACK position. Ph.D. required in either composition/rhetoric or in literature. Experience in both teaching in and administering a writing center required. To establish a university-wide, full-service writing center, including training and supervising staff personnel. Salary competitive.

This new center will provide writing aid for all levels of student writers, from remedial freshmen to Ph.D. candidates, but it will not be an adjunct to the Freshman Composition Program. Students in composition courses will need special permission to use the center. The structure, operation, and growth of the center will be up to the director with an advisory board consisting of members of the College of Arts and Sciences. The position is funded through this college, not the English Department.


Contact Professor Tom Barden, Dept. of English, University of Toledo, 2801 W. Bancroft Street, Toledo, Ohio 43606

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**A READER COMMENTS . . . .**

The articles and reviews in the Writing Lab Newsletter have greatly assisted me in understanding the problems that writing labs and tutors share.

Sandra Beaty  
Tarleton State Univ.



Muriel Harris, editor  
Department of English  
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