

The **WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER**

*Promoting the exchange of voices and ideas in
one-to-one teaching of writing*

Volume 15, Number 5

January, 1991

...from the editor...

In the March 1989 issue of the newsletter, Jim Bell analyzed the topics in newsletter articles to see what we are currently talking about. Another way to look at how we define ourselves is to see who writes those articles. In the early years of the newsletter, the voices we heard were almost exclusively from college or university settings. Then, as the writing lab concept continued to flourish and expand, we began to hear more and more from those involved in high school writing labs. In recent months I've been aware as I gathered articles for each issue (to begin that fascinating process known as "page formatting") that every issue includes articles by colleagues both in high school and post-secondary writing labs.

Now, in this issue, we have Carmen Charleston's article about a writing lab for grades 1-5. It is becoming evident, then, that what we do is integral to language arts instruction at all levels. Our conversation is richer because of these new voices, and surely our place in the writing curriculum is stronger as well.

•Muriel Harris, editor

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Tutor Selection: Assessing Applicants Through Group Interviews

While the training of peer tutors has been the subject of much scholarship, the selection of these tutors has received little attention. It has been my experience that, of the two, tutor selection is more problematic. That is, in spite of our careful questioning, it is often impossible to get a true picture of an applicant in the traditional single applicant interview. Tutors who are impressive in an individual interview can disappoint when they are put in actual tutoring situations. What, then, are we looking for in prospective peer tutors? And what is the most effective means of finding those qualities in the selection process?

We might assume that an analysis of the questions we are asking in our interviews would give a good indication of what we are looking for in a tutor. I found last year after one week of interviewing applicants that I had a list, in question form, of the qualities I look for when

talking to an applicant. I listen for students who are enthusiastic about writing. I want them to be aware of the process of writing, and to recognize the value of working on idea development before addressing issues of mechanics. However, analyzing the way I reacted to applicants' responses, I realized that what I considered to be a wrong answer did not necessarily eliminate an applicant from possible selection. I allowed for a lack of experience, and I recognized that all applicants who were selected would be trained in many of these areas. Unfortunately, no matter how much time is spent in training, there are, I believe, some traits that are difficult to teach, and tutors who lack these essential communication skills and personality traits, and who therefore make their students uncomfortable, will not be effective tutors. So while I asked questions related to writing, I was more interested in the way applicants answered, their attitudes, and their willingness to learn.

What research has been done on tutor selection addresses these interpersonal and communicative qualities. In her article entitled "On Becoming a More Effective Tutor," Lil Brannon points out that, because the problems of students in the writing center are often not restricted to writing problems, the "tutors' ability to interact well with their peers even supersedes their ability to write well" (105). In "A Peer Tutoring Staff: Four Crucial Aspects" (111 ff), Deborah Arfken lists several qualities that peer tutors ought to possess beyond their writing and teaching abilities, such as:

- an ability to offer helpful support to another student
- diplomacy and self-control
- patience and sensitivity
- an ability to convey information

Finally, Nancy Wood of the University of Texas states in her paper, "Selecting Effective Peer Tutors," that tutors should be "pleasant, unabrasive people who will make students feel comfortable" (5).

These are clearly important qualities and need to be given serious consideration in the selection of tutors. However, I do not believe that the traditional interview effectively measures these qualities. Our administrative staff at California State University in Fresno has become increasingly aware of the difficulty of judging these interpersonal skills in a traditional interview. Part of our application process

includes the submission of three faculty recommendations, but these are often written by faculty who are unaware of the qualities we are looking for in a tutor, and who therefore recommend strictly on the basis of an applicant's writing abilities rather than personal qualities. We have had applicants who have impressed us a great deal in their interviews with their knowledge about writing and their ideas about how to teach it, but who, during the semester, have disappointed us by intimidating their students with grammatical jargon, imposing their own ideas on students during topic exploration, or doing the majority of the talking and running the tutorials much like a lecture series. On the other hand, we have had applicants who have done poorly in the individual interview but who we believe, on the basis of our outside knowledge of them, have many of the personal qualities that we want in a tutor.

In light of these contradictions, it becomes apparent that the questions we often ask in our interviews do not provide the information we most want. We need, therefore, to establish a method of tutor selection which will allow writing lab administrators to assess applicants' interpersonal skills. Toward this end, Arfken suggests the use of a five-minute mock-tutorial session as a measure of these important traits, but I question whether a writing center administrator would be able to reproduce a realistic

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Manuscripts: Recommended length for articles is eight to twelve double-spaced typed pages, three to four pages for reviews, and one to two pages for the Tutors' Column, though longer and shorter manuscripts are invited. Please enclose self-addressed envelopes with return postage clipped (not pasted) to the envelope. The deadline for announcements is 45 days prior to the month of issue (e.g., Aug. 15 for the Oct. issue).

Please send all articles, reviews, announcements, comments, queries, and yearly donations to the editor.

tutoring situation or whether the applicant would be able to divorce the administrator's true role from the assumed one. In short, a mock tutorial is an artificial setting which may not provide a more accurate picture of applicants than the individual interview. We wanted to find a more realistic option.

In a visit to the Tutorial Center at U.C. Berkeley, I learned of an interview technique in which three potential tutors discuss a sample of student writing together. Berkeley's tutoring facility is organized quite differently from ours at CSUF. Their students are seen on a drop-in or referral basis and are tutored individually. At the Writing Lab at CSUF, students enroll for the entire semester and work in groups of three students per tutor, twice a week. We encourage tutors to run the tutorial as a workshop so that students can learn from one another. Tutors must be able to make quick decisions about how to organize the group for the hour and how to work with several people at once. Therefore, we felt that the group style of interviewing would provide the opportunity we needed to evaluate the small group skills that are so important in our Writing Lab.

We prepared two case studies for our applicants to discuss, consisting of writing samples and histories of two hypothetical students. We made them as realistic as possible by choosing samples from our own tutoring and teaching experiences. One essay was written by a student with sentence-level errors who was discouraged about being in Developmental Composition for the second time. The other was from a student whose writing lacked development, but who felt the problem lay in the grading method rather than in her writing. By endowing the created students with personalities and attitudes as well as writing strengths and weaknesses, we felt that the applicants would be forced to address the writing samples as belonging to living, breathing students and to speculate on how they might handle the students' attitudes along with their writing. In order to insure that the applicants approached the writing before them as a sample to be considered in the student's overall progress rather than as one finished product, we told them to imagine that this was the first of a semester-long relationship with each of the students, that the student has brought this piece of writing to the Lab for her first tutoring session, and that the tutors are talking together for a few minutes to bounce ideas off of one

another and to exchange ideas about long term goals for this student before going out to meet with her.

Students interested in a tutoring position were asked to submit a completed application form, a record of their grades, three letters of recommendation, and one writing sample. From the forty-four applications submitted, we selected thirty-three people to interview on the basis of their writing samples, experience, and letters of recommendation. Applicants were encouraged to pick up the case studies early and were therefore allowed to prepare for their interview, a luxury not afforded them in an actual tutoring situation. We chose to do this to balance out the inevitable jitters of interview situations. Although we suspected that many applicants would get suggestions from their friends who were already working in the Lab and had tutoring experience, we felt that the preparation they would do would be along the lines of pedagogical knowledge and would better prepare them for the act of tutoring in the event that they were hired. Their preparation would not change the way they would interact with the other applicants, and this is what we wanted most to observe.

We set up the tables in a large open square in order to avoid an "Us and Them" division and had between three and five Lab staff listening to each session. We scheduled the applicants in groups of three for one-hour slots, allowing 15 minutes for discussion of each case study, 15 minutes for questions that we felt we needed to ask in order to fill any gaps or for questions that the applicants wanted to ask us, and 15 minutes for the staff to discuss our impressions after the applicants had left.

We evaluated applicants' performance in the interviews in three main areas. As in our former style of interview, we judged pedagogical knowledge as applied to the writing samples and sensitivity to the temperaments of the students described in the case studies. But with the new system, we were also able to watch the way applicants worked with the others in their group. We made it clear that they were not in competition with one another, but that they were to think of themselves as tutors discussing their student's writing. They were encouraged to work together and bring out one another's ideas as well as to express their own. We watched for sensitivity to quieter applicants, openness to other ideas, good listening skills,

and an ability to communicate ideas clearly and effectively.

In many ways the group style of interviewing proved to be just what we expected, allowing us to see into the characters and personalities of our applicants in ways we would not have, had they come in alone. Since applicants were scheduled in groups, we were able to observe how they interacted, even outside of the official interview. Applicants waited outside the Lab for their turn, and we could observe them talking to one another or sitting in silence. When they were brought in, they had the opportunity to take the initiative and introduce themselves or to wait for us to introduce them to one another. At the start of their interview, we invited them to turn their chairs toward one another in order to facilitate discussion. Some were quick to comply; others were reticent. Even these relatively small indications of the applicants' manner gave us an idea of how comfortable they were in the group and how they would handle the responsibility of making their students feel comfortable in a group setting.

Watching the new tutors in action with their students these first six weeks of the semester, I have become convinced that the group interview provided an accurate picture of the applicants; we have had very few surprises. In order to give a clear picture of our findings, I believe it would be best to provide several case studies which illustrate those results.

The ideal applicants were those who handled the group interaction extremely well. It was clear from their comments on the writing samples that they had an impressive amount of knowledge about writing and sound ideas as to how to convey that knowledge to students in the Writing Lab. Yet instead of simply talking at length about their ideas, they spoke to the others in their group and elicited ideas from them. Typical responses included, "I thought we could have this student examine each fragment in her paper, and see if she could pin down the common denominator in her mistakes. Maybe have her write them on another sheet of paper and then correct them. What do you think?" By asking the others for ideas, these applicants demonstrated that they were comfortable putting their ideas before the scrutiny of others, leading discussions, and using questioning techniques to draw out

ideas. These applicants probably would have done well in the individual interview also, but in the group they had just one more opportunity to demonstrate their skills. The applicants from this category were on the top of our hiring list and have, to this point in the semester, been just what we expected: excellent, enthusiastic tutors.

In contrast, we had one applicant who had an impressive amount of tutoring experience and a lot of ideas about tutoring techniques. With her knowledge and experience, she probably would have done very well in an individual interview. But in the group setting, her manner was pushy and closed-minded. During the discussion of possible approaches to the writing samples at hand, the suggestions of the other applicants were taken condescendingly. She seemed convinced of the superiority of her approach and was argumentative in proving her point. She displayed none of the peer-like qualities that we look for in a peer tutor; hers was a professorial approach, even to her potential colleagues. We felt safe in assuming that this approach would reach to her tutees as well, and on the basis of these qualities, we chose not to hire her.

Because we had several people re-interview who had not been selected on the basis of their individual interview the previous semester, we had the opportunity to compare applicants interviewed under the two systems, individual and group interviews. This has proven to be very helpful in our assessment of the new interviewing technique. One applicant, David, had received strong letters of recommendation but had been singularly unimpressive in his individual interview with us. Given one question, he spoke non-stop for the entire time, saying little of value. When he came back for the group interview, the difference was amazing. He who had talked continuously in his earlier interview was one of the best listeners in his group. He listened, responded with confirming comments, and added to the suggestions and ideas of the other applicants. He was positive in his approach and complete in his suggestions, addressing at some point in the discussion virtually all aspects which would need to be covered with this student.

I met David after the interviews to discuss his impressions of the two methods. His perception of the individual interview, not surprisingly, was quite different from ours.

While we had observed him jumping from one thought to another, making few transitions or connections, he had felt compelled to go on talking, thinking that we were waiting for him to say more. In light of the second interview, it becomes apparent that nerves had gotten the better of him during that first session. He went on to say that in the group interview he felt much more at ease because he had the presence of others to take the spotlight off of him exclusively, had other ideas to work from, and had the assurance of knowing that he was not alone in his plight.

We had interviewed another applicant, Mike, individually in the previous semester. He had appeared to us to be arrogant and overly confident and gave the impression that there was nothing he could learn by working at the Lab. In contrast, his group interview showed him simply to be enthusiastic and confident, but not overly so. He drew out the others in his group and confirmed their ideas as well as putting forth his own.

Both of these men are serving on our tutoring staff at present, and both are tutoring as competently as we expected on the basis of their second interviews.

Due to a leap in enrollment this semester, we have found ourselves in need of more new tutors than we expected last spring. As a result, some of those about whom we had some minor doubts have joined our staff. While this is not an ideal situation for the Writing Lab, it has provided an opportunity to measure, to a limited extent at this early time of the semester, how accurately we judged those applicants. Two of these had struck us as a bit over-anxious in their group session. We agreed that although they were pleasant, friendly people with some good ideas, they seemed anxious to prove themselves, quick to get their various bits of knowledge into the discussion, and slightly defensive when their ideas were challenged or questioned. But their writing and recommendations were good, and in order to meet the growing demand, we hired them. While we expected the weaknesses we saw in their interviews to have some effect on their tutoring, we did not expect to see evidence of those weaknesses so early in the semester, but within the first month of tutoring, both of these tutors have had some sort of personality conflict in their sessions. The tutors, facing less-than-enthusiastic students have become

insecure and, in an effort to retain control, have confronted the students in an authoritarian fashion. In one case, the tutor attempted to keep order in a group by demanding promptness and undivided attention with an authoritarian, "Are you listening?" thus confronting an issue that could have been handled more diplomatically. This is the type of insecurity that we witnessed in the interview sessions when these applicants were working with others who had ideas different from theirs. Clearly, the traits exhibited in the group interview were true indications of the way the applicants would tutor.

While overall results have been good, there were some aspects of the group interviewing that gave us problems. First, we found that on a few occasions, we had some applicants with very similar personalities interviewing together. It's hard to say whether these individuals just happened to be scheduled together, or if one person set the tone for the group, and others simply followed along. For example, we had a group made up of three tender-hearted souls who spent the entire time discussing the attitudes, fears, and feelings of the students in question. In spite of our request that they discuss all aspects of the tutoring situation, they focused solely on how they might encourage these discouraged students, and minister to their needs without considering any concrete steps they might take to help the students improve their writing. In contrast to that, we had a group who focused entirely on grammatical weaknesses in the writing samples and spent their time discussing the different exercises they might have the students work on, never once considering adapting their methods to suit the individual students' temperaments.

Of course, both approaches are valuable at some point in tutoring, but we wanted and felt justified in expecting our applicants to exhibit an awareness of the need for all of these. The problem here was that once these groups got stuck in a particular aspect of the discussion, we felt it necessary to intervene and ask a question or two to get them off of that topic and onto a more productive line of discussion. However, it was difficult to ask a question that was not leading. Simply the fact that we were intervening when the plan was to leave them to their own discussion seemed to make it obvious that we wanted something that they were not giving us, and as a result, the purpose

of the question was usually quite obvious. Further, once a question was posed, the groups found it difficult to get back into a discussion among themselves. Instead, they slipped into the traditional style of interview, addressing their answers to whomever had asked the question and seeming reticent to answer at all if they had not been asked directly.

Another difficulty arose in our method of grouping. We set up our interview sessions pretty much by chance; applicants were signed up according to their schedules only. No consideration was given to grouping them by major or experience. We had one session in which a history major, Kim, was with two English majors with tutoring experience. Although I don't doubt that Kim would have been able to come up with some of her own ideas about how to deal with the students in question, she didn't have much of a chance because many of the ideas were rattled off by the others. And while this does indicate a certain lack of assertiveness on Kim's part, one wonders if she would have been less intimidated in a group whose experience was similar to hers.

Another characteristic of this type of interview is that it can be difficult to judge who is the first to give a good idea, and who is riding on the answers of others. On first consideration of this, it seemed problematic, but I have come to the conclusion that it is not. If applicants recognize the value of the comments of others, adopt those ideas and add to them, they show an ability and willingness to learn from the ideas of others. Certainly if an applicant can come up with no original suggestions for the tutee, that should be an indication of a lack of ability. But learning from others is evidence of the kind of open-mindedness we want in a Writing Lab tutor.

Although there are some uncertainties in this method, and some room for refinement, nonetheless, our administrative staff is convinced that the group style of interviewing affords numerous advantages. Because applicants come in together, we have an opportunity to see and evaluate the interpersonal qualities of the individuals. Are they sensitive? Are they good listeners? Do they sound positive and affirming in their comments? Are they, in Nancy Wood's words, "pleasant, unabrasive people?" In short, the group style of interview gets more to the heart of the goal of the tutor

selection process. We need to determine what qualities are important in a tutor, and while expertise in writing certainly must not be overlooked, we can get a fairly accurate indication of this in the other aspects of the selection process. Qualities such as diplomacy, sensitivity, and an ability to listen are equally important, and are too often overlooked in the selection process. We must provide a setting that will display these important qualities. The group interview provides that setting.

Jill Bergman
California State University
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Job Opening

Director of New Writing Center

Position for a Director of a new Writing Center, beginning Fall, 1991. Tenure earning. Ph. D. and appropriate training and/or experience required. Interest in teaching composition theory and pedagogy. Rank and salary open. Dept. offers B. A. and M. A. in English, with graduate certificates in Tech. Writing and TESOL. Applications will be read and acknowledged until the position is filled, but applicants are encouraged to send letter and vita by Dec. 14 to John S. Mebane, Chair, Department of English, University of Alabama in Huntsville, Huntsville, Alabama 35899. Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action Institution.

Call for Papers

Rocky Mountain Writing Center Association Conference

October 17-19, 1991
Tempe, AZ

Please send proposals (300-word maximum) for 15-20 minute papers to M. Clare Sweeney, 2625 College Avenue South, Tempe, AZ 85282-2344. Deadline: March 1, 1991.

New York College Learning Skills Association

14th Annual Symposium on Developmental Education

April 7-9, 1991
Ithaca, NY

For information contact Carl M. Wahlstrom, Genesee Community College, One College Road, Batavia, NY 14020 (716-343-0055, ext. 305)

2nd Annual Conference

Colloquium on Learning Enhancement

April 25-26, 1991
Toledo, Ohio

"Tutoring: Connecting for Success"

For information, contact: Joan Mullin, The Writing Center, The University of Toledo, Toledo, Ohio 43606-3390.

Calendar for Writing Center Associations (WCAs)

Feb. 15: CUNY Writing Centers Association, in New York, NY.

Contact: David Fletcher, Lehman College, B38 Carman, 250 Bedford Park Blvd. West, Bronx, NY 10468

April 1: East Central Writing Centers Association, in Highland Heights, KY.

Contact: Paul Ellis, Writing Center, No. Kentucky U., Highland Heights, KY 41076

April 11-13: Southeastern Writing Center Association, in Birmingham, AL.

Contact: Loretta Cobb, Harbart Writing Center, U. of Montevallo, Montevallo, AL 35115 or David Roberts, University Writing Programs, Samford U., Birmingham, AL 35229

Oct. 17-19: Rocky Mountain Writing Center Association, in Tempe, AZ.

Contact: M. Clare Sweeney, 2625 College Ave. South, Tempe, AZ 85282-2344

Computers for the Disabled

As an addition to my MicroStyle column on computers for the disabled (*Writing Lab Newsletter* 14.9 [May, 1990]: 6-7), I recommend the following two books which provide excellent information on computer adaptations for disabled students:

1. *Computer Access in Higher Education for Students with Disabilities: A Practical Guide to the Selection and Use of Computer Technology.* ed. Carl Brown, et al. 2nd ed.

Available from High-Tech Center Training Unit, 21050 McClellan Rd., Cupertino, CA, 95014, (408) 996-4636.

This book describes computer adaptations available for disabled students; includes case studies of individual students; suggests specific strategies to use in instructing disabled students; and reviews specific products for both Apple and IBM computers, giving the price and manufacturer of each product.

2. *Trace Resource Book: Assistive Technologies for Communication, Control and Computer Access.* ed. Jan R. Berliss, et al.

Available from Trace Research and Development Center, S-151 Waisman Center, University of Wisconsin, 1500 Highland Ave., Madison, WI, 53705, (608) 263-2237.

The *Trace Resource Book* discusses not only computer access for disabled students, but also the communication technology available for individuals with hearing and speaking impairments. This book covers specific products and their price and manufacturer.

Renee Berta
University of Texas
at El Paso

Our Bill of Writes

Ideas for mottos, tee-shirts, etc., presented by the Fall 1990 staff of the University of Arkansas at Little Rock Writing Center:

- This is the **Write** Place
- We have the **write** stuff
- Do the **write** thing
- Stand up for your **writes**
- You have a **write** to learn
- Write** on!
- Do it **write!**
- Write** as rain
- Write** on target
- All the **write** moves
- My hero is Dudley Do-**Write** of the Mounties

- Do you know the difference between wrong and **write**?
- Watch out for his **write**-cross!
- Never lead with your **write**
- This is the **write** time!
- Make a **write** turn here
- Walk in the path of **write**-ousness
- Turn **write** at the next intersection
-Or turn **write** here
- He stood up-**write**
- Get to it **write** away
- Do you have the **write** stuff?
- Do it **write** the first time
- The price is **write**
- Two wrongs don't make a **write**
- 90% of the population is **write**-handed
- Get it **write!**
- Might makes **write!**
- Don't worry, it will be all **write**
- Are you part of the **write**-to-life movement?
- Sacrificial **writes**
- Lefties have **writes** too!
- Sally is our great **write** leader
- The **Writes** of Spring
- All the **write** people come here
- Administer the last **writes**
- Writes** of Passage
- Inalienable **Writes**
- To try to **write** the wrongs of others
- Write** angles
- I am a human **writes** advocate
- Write** handed
- Yield the **write**-of-way
- Yeah, **write**
- I'm looking for Mr. **Write**
- Write** brain/left brain
- A **write** winger
- He played **write**-field in the series
- Down-**write** disgusting
- Not in his **write** mind
- Draw a **write** triangle
- Write** on, Dudes!
- Vanna **Write**
- Writers** of the Purple Sage
- Left, **write**, left!
- I'm always **write**.
- We are down-**write** awesome

Add your own.....

Sally Crisp
University of Arkansas
at Little Rock

Tutors' Column

Qualities of a Good Writing Assistant

During my two years as a writing assistant in the writing lab at Oregon State University, I've discovered that the dyad of writing assistant and writer is very special. Because of this, I've developed specific skills which help make my sessions both productive and positive. While assistants invariably and justifiably have their own unique style, these qualities may be useful for all writing assistants to have: active listening, feedback finesse, individualization, and guidance.

Active Listening

In recent years, a popular term in the fields of psychology and education has been active listening. Basically, this term means that as a listener, one focuses on what the speaker is saying; then, the listener attempts to paraphrase what the speaker has said. While using this makes sense in writing sessions also, sometimes this doesn't happen. Often, while we have every intention of listening to the writer, we are busy thinking about the assignment we have to do that night, the laundry that needs to get done, or that cute person-of-the-opposite-sex in our 8:30 class. In other words, we have a lot on our minds besides what is presented to us in a writing session. How often have you had to ask a question twice because you weren't really listening the first time? I've found that if I make a conscious effort to focus on the session and tune out external stimuli, I'm able to listen much more effectively. Another facet of active listening is paraphrasing which, granted, is not always necessary (we do have time constraints), but can be very useful when you are unsure about the writer's intentions. All in all, our function is as much that of a sounding board as it is that of a provider of feedback.

Feedback Finesse

For those times we are called upon to give feedback, I have developed what I call feedback finesse. Actually, it sounds much

fancier and more mysterious than it really is. Essentially, this skill means offering meaningful feedback. A writer may not be able to understand some of the terminology we use (i.e. gerund, participle phrase, fragment); therefore, our attempts to explain may confuse the writer. It may be more useful to oversimplify than to worry about "insulting someone's intelligence." Equally important in providing meaningful feedback is offering specific feedback. There is a great difference between "This is a good paragraph" and "I like your specific examples and transitions in this paragraph." As writers ourselves, we know that "Awkward" is not nearly as helpful as "The verb in this sentence is misused." In writing sessions, we let writers know the specific strengths and weaknesses of their papers in terms they can understand.

Individualization

In order to adequately use feedback finesse, we should gear the session towards the individual. While there are certain phrases, approaches, and/or methods we may use consistently in our sessions (such as always ending a session on a positive note or asking the writer to read the paper to you), our writers will benefit the most if we individualize each session. To individualize we must be highly receptive to the writer (if he/she is quiet and withdrawn, we need to elicit involvement gently). We need to remain open-minded to the abilities of each writer as well as to the subjects of their papers. Instead of assuming that your style of working with writers will fit the writer, adapt your style to the specific needs of that writer. If a writer needs many examples, provide them. If a writer has a five-page paper due in less than twelve hours, you may need to concentrate on organization more than punctuation. Certainly, you don't want to compromise your own principles or methods in such a way that you become uncomfortable, but compensating for individual differences is helpful for you and the writer. Overall, we

should remember that each writer is unique both as a person and as a writer; as much as possible, we should adjust our style to cater to the personality and needs of each person we work with.

Guidance

Once we learn to use effective communication skills such as active listening, feedback finesse, and individualizing, the guidance we offer will fall in place. We should remember when working with writers that there is a difference between guiding a writer toward ideas and giving the writer ideas. We all know that there is a big difference between "ghost' has an 'h' in it" and "that word is misspelled." When we provide answers, we are doing at least two things wrong: 1) we are not encouraging writers to use their own ideas and 2) we are incorrectly applying our own knowledge. Yes, it is more challenging and sometimes even seemingly impossible to guide writers in the direction they need to go. Yes, it is also more fair and more useful for writers to be led into discovering their own answers than simply to be told them. Realistically, we want the writers to improve their skills on their own so that they may apply them in future writing—giving them a short term cure-all will not necessarily fulfill that goal. The most common method of guiding is to ask questions: "This should be a comma" can change to "Can you tell me why you put that semicolon there?" We need to remember that writers will benefit most if we give them the tools to figure out their own problems.

While each of the skills or qualities mentioned here is easy to describe, I also realize that they are not so easy to consistently implement in writing sessions. I look at perfecting these qualities as an ongoing process in which I may always be involved. To me what makes it worthwhile are the results I see in the writers I work with. Not only that, but my communication skills in general have improved as a result of my efforts to continually apply my "writing assistant skills." The topics covered here are not all-inclusive, but they may give some valuable insight into the type of helpful writing assistant we are all striving to be.

Candice Davis
Writing Assistant
Oregon State University
Corvallis, OR

Inner-City Writing Centers in St. Louis Public Schools

The Writing Enrichment Lab concept grew out of the Desegregation Plan for the City of St. Louis. It is a court-ordered program which was developed to provide "enrichment labs"—additional resources to strengthen the educational programs for racially isolated schools—e.g. predominantly or all black schools. Labs were established in 1980 in approximately sixty schools, most of which were located in North St. Louis. School administration and staff had the option of choosing to have reading, math, science, or writing labs. Since Laclede School has language arts as its primary emphasis, we chose to have a writing lab.

The basic structure of the writing lab is that an entire class with its teacher will participate in lab experiences on a regular schedule—two or three times weekly. The homeroom teacher stays with the class for the entire period, working with the lab teacher in the instruction phase as a team. The team also includes a teaching assistant. Following development of learning plans, some students work with the lab teachers while others work with the classroom teacher and/or assistant. Other students work on independent projects.

Initially each lab teacher was responsible for the set-up, organization, course outline, objectives, curriculum, materials, scheduling, guidelines, evaluation, correlation and teacher-teaming cooperation. In other words, *everything!* Thus each lab is autonomous and unique in direct relation to the personality of the lead teacher.

My basic philosophy in the lab is that the students will have as many opportunities as possible to write in as many different formats or genres as possible. They are not expected to master all of them at once, but they will have experienced them. Philosophy translated: "We will write and write, and then we'll write some more."

Structure, consistency, and shared goals are the main ingredients for the success of the writing lab at Laclede School. Teacher cooperation, lesson coordination, enthusiasm, discipline, organization, interesting activities, knowledge of students' abilities and capabili-

ties, and shared ideals of high teacher expectations, conducive learning environment, and emphasis on the acquisition of a strong foundation in basic skills are all essential elements. The students at Laclede School, a predominantly black (99%), inner-city school, consistently achieve the highest ranking possible (Outstanding on an Outstanding-Excellent-Good rating scale), on the St. Louis Public Schools' annual 3rd and 5th grade writing assessments. Also the achievement scores in language arts are well above the national average for Grades 1-5.

In our writing lab I normally have about thirteen different classes in Grades 1-5. Thirteen classes, 13 different teachers, 275-300 students coming in back-to-back classes, 5 or 6 sessions each day, 5 days a week. I have a 2-hour planning period each day which includes 30 minutes for lunch. This format is very different from being a regular classroom teacher. It requires a person with a very flexible personality who is able to deal with many people and who loves children, adults, and teaching.

When classes come to the lab, we immediately begin on the day's lesson. I continuously monitor the students' work, giving direct and immediate assistance with ideas, grammar, spelling, syntax, and/or mechanics. The classroom teacher and lab assistant provide the same type of help to the students. Moving around the room helps me to spend some time with each child, assess progress, diagnose weaknesses, provide immediate, positive feedback, and design remediation.

The organization and pace of the class must be planned and consistent. Lesson plans must be prepared and ready when the class arrives. The children like the structure and the security of knowing what to do and what is expected of them. The principle of 'time-on-task' is practiced and adhered to.

The basic language of instruction is consistent between classroom and lab in order to keep confusion regarding directions to a minimum. Concepts are repeated consistently throughout the school day with the hope that they will eventually become automatic responses and reactions. Repetitions by the group help to avoid embarrassment to students who have not yet grasped the subject idea. It

also reinforces the concept for the total group. We encourage peer editing through exchange of papers, games, and checklists. Everybody participates from Grade 1 up.

All student work is kept in folders in the lab for reference and review. This provides a longitudinal record for diagnosis, progress analysis, parent conferences, and evaluation of attainment and mastery of skills. Everyone gets to take all of their work home at the end of the school year.

We recently received computers in the school. We have two in Grades 3, 4, 5 and Kindergarten. The writing lab has 5 Apple II's and 2 Imagewriter printers. I attempt to see that fifteen of the students in every class get to spend at least fifteen minutes at the computer while they are in the writing lab. They must begin their work immediately and stop when the timer rings. They are learning keyboarding and also get to do speed exercises, play games, and compose stories. I use a variety of keyboarding programs and other software which is proving to be very effective and motivating.

While the enrichment lab is primarily for students in Grades 1-5, we have been able to mainstream several of the children from the Special Education Unit. The teacher determines at which level they are able to work, and they come to the lab with an assigned class. I think this is very good for all of the students. It gives the children a better, more positive self image of themselves and provides an opportunity for them to learn the value of helping others and of being helped.

The Writing Enrichment Lab is an exciting place to work, but it requires a great deal of time, energy, and patience. It is a place of consummate activity, learning, and growth.

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Will You Proofread My Paper?: Responding to Student Writing in the Writing Center

Many students come to the Conestoga High School English Resource Room, which is our version of a writing center, asking for help with their papers. Some unfortunate ones, from time to time, have asked to have their papers proofread. I say "unfortunate" because such requests have usually been met with scowls, impatient grumblings, or simply what I have learned to say, "I don't proofread students' papers, but perhaps I can help you in some other way."

But why does this question arouse such a negative reaction in so many of us? What does it mean in terms of the real help we *do* provide? And why do students, unknowingly, continue to make this inappropriate request for help? I think there are several reasons. First of all, the question on proofreading reflects some basic misconceptions students have about the role of the reader in the writing center, and secondly, it also tells us something about their confusions as to how they view their own writing processes. I might add that readers and teachers too can have misconceptions about their roles in responding to students' papers. For instance, teachers in our department will occasionally say to me, "I feel insulted when students ask for proofreading, but I don't really know how to respond."

Although I have never liked the question about proofreading, until I became conversant with the teaching of writing literature, I never quite knew why. It is because this particular question cuts to the heart of issues affecting writers and readers both *in* and *out* of the writing center that I have chosen to build this paper around it.

I think that there are three fundamental concerns here: first, what exactly does the reader do in responding to student writing in the writing center? Secondly, what obstacles or problems can get in the way of a productive reader/writer interchange? And finally, how does a good reader/writer relationship in the writing center affect what teachers do outside

of the writing center, in short, in the classroom?

I should define at the start what I mean by "reader": this person may be a teacher, a peer tutor, a trained volunteer, a graduate student, a teaching assistant, or a professional tutor.

Let's start with the second question, the problems or obstacles facing the reader and writer as they interact. Student misperception about the help being offered is the first obstacle, I think. When students ask for help with proofreading, ninety-nine times out of a hundred, they do so because they don't know what else to say. The other one percent of the time, they are really looking for someone to help them check mechanical errors on a draft that has already gone through several extensive revisions.

What does the question on proofreading tell us? First of all, it implies a request for a quick fix, an overriding concern for mechanics at the expense of content and organization, in short, a notion of revision as a surface reading of the text, rather than a substantive rethinking of content and structure. Perhaps more seriously, such a question implies that we (the reader) and not they (the writer) are in charge of the paper, and also, that we, not they, are in charge of the conference itself.

Another kind of problem can occur with the reader. Although the following example may seem obvious, I'd like to use it nonetheless. I stress reading the paper with the student physically present because this arrangement focuses on the writer and what he or she is trying to say, rather than on the text and what it does or does not say. Each fall in our writing center when we are very busy reading and responding to students' college admission essays, students will often thrust a paper at me in the hall or in passing and ask when can I read it and return it to them. I refuse such requests, explaining that I never read a

student's paper without the student being present. Some are put out by what they interpret as a great inconvenience. I had this point underscored recently in a humorous way when our aide in the resource room gave me a message that a student had left a lengthy report with her with the request that a teacher read it, respond to it, and then leave it to be picked up. I have to tell you that of all the different requests I have had over the years, I was stunned at this one: a student whom I had never met had dropped a long, handwritten document to be proofread with no other explanation whatsoever. And I was to react to it, hand it back, without ever meeting the student. The only analogy that came to my mind was that the student had left his writing like a sack of messy laundry and wanted to come back later when it was all cleaned up.

Well, we all know that teaching writing is a dirty business and how often we feel as if we've been pulled through the wringer!

The third kind of problem that gets in the way of a productive reader/writer interchange is the issue of who has ownership or authority over the student's text. Now I'm certain that we would all say that the paper belongs to the student, but let us consider if our actions always reflect this assumption. If the students using our writing centers have been exposed (and I think most have) to teachers who have, even with the best of intentions, overcorrected and over-evaluated their papers, then these students have learned from this experience that someone else, and not themselves, knows best. Brannon and Knoblauch in their essay, "On Students' Rights to Their Own Texts: A Model of Teacher Response" (1982), claim that when we fill a student's paper with corrections and judgments, we are inadvertently and perhaps unintentionally taking over the ownership of that paper.

Actually, however, our behavior is only part of the problem. Not only should the reader in the writing center refrain from proofreading and judging, that reader must do everything possible to help the student make his or her own decisions about the paper, in short, to take charge of the text. Perhaps we should all recognize a truism here. For the most part, inexperienced student writers are not accustomed to, nor do they want, this responsibility. Just as they don't want responsibility for their learning, or for other events in

their lives, in the same way they resist having options and making choices. How many times have students said to us, "well, you said that if I tried such and such with the second paragraph, that the paper would be better but look what happened," implying that we are at fault for the paper's weaknesses. So, in many ways, at times it may seem easier and faster for both teacher and student if we just tell them what their papers should say, and how they should change them. Students resist having the authority they don't know how to use. Nonetheless, we do persist because we know that this is the only way students can gain ownership not only of their texts, but, more importantly, I think, of their writing processes. In short, we must do everything we can to resist taking over the student's paper and do everything in our power to ensure that they take responsibility for them.

Now that we have identified some of the problems that may exist when we proofread, overcorrect or excessively judge their papers, let us explore those kinds of behaviors that are most helpful to the student writer.

One of the common failings of inexperienced writers is their difficulties in accommodating their readers' needs because they lack skill in viewing their texts from the reader's perspective. We see the results of this everywhere in their writing: vague topic conceptualizations, lack of development, and texts that are filled with gaps and skips in meaning.

Inexperienced student writers are also quite often inexperienced readers who have never become so immersed in the printed word that they have developed a reader's ear for the right word, for the flow of a good sentence, for the logic of a sound argument. In other words, these students do not take the role of the reader in the writing process — a step essential to effective revising — because they lack experience with the transactions that readers make, such as setting up expectations, making predictions, and testing hypotheses.

In his article, "Teaching the Other Self: The Writer's First Reader," Donald Murray calls for instruction in teaching students how to read their own writing, instruction that will work toward "[developing] the writer's other self — the writer's first reader," a self which teachers and tutors can help in bringing to conscious existence.

Well, exactly what would this instruction consist of? What do writers do when they read their own writing, and how can inexperienced revisers learn this behavior? And, on a more practical level, how can we teach these techniques to our writing center readers and tutors so that they can model them with the students?

Most importantly, I think we must remember that in responding to the student's paper, we are modeling how the student should respond to his own writing. If all *we* do is proofread, edit, and judge, then that's all *they* will do. But if we ask questions, listen, and give feedback—consistently and repeatedly over a long period of time—then our modeling will show them how to respond to their own papers.

Let's start with the basics. Reader and writer should sit side by side so that both have a good view of the text. The writer reads his or her paper aloud while the reader follows along in the text and listens. In modeling the transactions that readers make, the writing center reader can perform a variety of tasks, as reflected in the different statements that follow.

Why not start by announcing, "I am your reader; pretend you didn't write this, and that you too are reading this for the first time." If the unread parts of the paper are covered, as I strongly recommend, then the student will be forced to act as a reader and not be distracted by what she wrote as a writer. A reader can ask questions, "what is the main point you want to get across in this essay?" or a reader might put into his own words what the writer said, "I am hearing you talk about such and such in your first paragraph; is that what you wanted to say?"

Paraphrasing the writer's text and feeding it back is probably one of the most invaluable services that a reader can perform. Or, a reader can help the writer make predictions, "now that you've determined the point of your first paragraph, what are we expecting the second paragraph to be about?" In addition, a reader can give reactions, for example, saying, "I'm confused when your first paragraph says you're going to talk about Homer's portrayal of Helen, and your last paragraph focuses on Homer's view of Hector." Or, a reader might say, "based on your opening paragraph, it seems that your paper could explore several different directions: I'm really curious to see

which path you're going to take."

Of all the tasks that the reader and writer complete, two, I think, are especially noteworthy: paraphrasing and predicting. Both paraphrasing and predicting help students compare text with intention, a task that can cause serious difficulties for many writers. Paraphrasing can aid students in clarifying their topics and in comprehending their texts; predicting can help the student hear the reader's unspoken questions in critical assessment. Both of these activities deserve special attention because they can simplify the complexities of the revision process for the inexperienced writer.

One common failure point for the inexperienced writer is that he/she often does not see a need for revision. When we ask students if they need to revise, we all know some of the typical responses: "it's fine the way it is," or, "I guess so," or more honestly, "I don't know."

One major reason why students don't know if their texts say what they want them to say is that many don't really know what they want to say; another common failure point is that many cannot tell in rereading their texts what it is that they have actually said. Through modeling, the reader can use paraphrasing to help in addressing these needs — both in clarifying the thesis and in understanding the text. Both are essential to building mental representations of the thesis and of the text, a requirement for any successful comparison of one with the other.

Paraphrasing and predicting can occur at different times in the revising process. Depending on the state of the student's paper—brainstorming, rough draft, final draft—the reader's response may be different. Where paraphrasing helps in clarifying the thesis and the text, predicting helps in other ways. The reader can lead the student into predicting the contents of expected sentences, paragraphs, or entire passages. "What does the reader need to know next?" "After the first part is presented, what are we expecting to follow?" "If that is the main point of your essay, then what are we expecting in the first section of development?" Only by understanding the reader's specific expectations, which the live reader in the conference is modeling, can the student learn how to fulfill those expectations.

Making correct predictions is the essence of successful experiences in reading and writing. Readers cannot read without first having expectations and then finding out whether or not these expectations have been realized. Writers cannot communicate without anticipating readers' needs, then satisfying them. When the reader in the writing center models all of these behaviors, then writers learn how to incorporate them into their own writing behavior.

Throughout this entire process, the reader is helping the student find options for making substantive changes in content and style. The student is learning how to make choices, to take charge of her text. In addition to questioning, listening, feeding back, and reacting, the reader is also diagnosing the writer's needs, encouraging the writer in tackling the many complications of revising, and in helping her coordinate the whole process. Muriel Harris' helpful text, *Teaching One-to-One: The Writing Conference* (1986) describes many of these tasks in great detail.

Writing center theorists Stephen North and Tilly and John Warnock remind us how important it is for writers to have reading partners wherever they may be. Thus, I think we need to make some obvious transferences from what happens between reader and writer in the writing center to what happens between teacher and student in the classroom. In working with a teacher who is simulating a reader's behavior, eventually the student learns to internalize the questions the teacher asks. Together, teacher and student (in functioning as reader and writer) are rehearsing the questions that writers will later ask of themselves—alone. These steps are necessary in developing that critical inner voice, what Murray refers to as the writer's first reader.

Eventually, then, our students do learn to ask us for appropriate kinds of help: "will you look this over?" or, "will you help me with my draft?" or, the question I especially like, "will you read this with me?" And if a teacher responds, "what especially would you like me to look for," then that reader is saying several things to the student: (1) first, there are many possible things I could look for in your paper; and (2) *you're* in charge of how I help you."

In summary, I would suggest that we

work hard to resist the lure of editing and judging our students' papers, but instead explore the many ways we can act as their readers, as in demonstrating to them the skills of paraphrasing and predicting. Ultimately, I think that it is in the repetition of our behaviors—when we act as readers—that puts students in charge of their texts and of their writing processes.

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Laundry Day at the Writing Lab

Writing lab clients often trust their tutors implicitly, seeing them as founts of wisdom, fully capable, for better or worse, of answering almost any questions, even inquiries not necessarily associated with composition and rhetoric. How many times have we tutors been asked questions like, "Where's the registrar's office?" or "Where's the best place to buy floppy disks?"

The other day, however, I was asked a question that even with ten years experience in writing labs I could not have anticipated. In a tutorial, a client and I were discussing the nature of a research paper. He wanted to know the differences between a research paper and a term paper, how to write endnotes, and how to type the Works Cited page. At the end of this tutorial, the client suddenly turned to me. He pointed down to his pants and asked, "Do you think the stain remover my mom sent me will take out this stain from my jean cuffs?"

Of course, tutors are the source of much information. Ask them about commas. Ask them about paragraph structure. Ask them about analyzing an audience....But ask them about laundry and stain removers?

Perhaps being away from home for the first time made this client turn to us for advice on doing laundry. But more apparently, the intimacy and immediacy of the tutor-student relationship made this client comfortable enough to ask about washday; obviously, the emotional support and sustenance the client had received for all his writings carried over even to doing his laundry. For this student, the Writing Lab had truly become his "alma mater."

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WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER

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