

The **WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER**

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

Volume 15, Number 6

February, 1991

*....from the editor....*

For those of you who have been looking forward to a new directory of writing centers, you'll be pleased to see the form on page 12 to copy and fill out for your entry. Pam Farrell, with her usual energy and efficiency, will be getting it all in shape and will let people know when printed copies are available.

Another organizing, sharing project for us is the Materials Exchange Board on page 10. Please join in and let the rest of us know what you have to share (and what the costs are). Most of the requests I hear from people starting up new writing labs are for instructional handouts, but there are also those who would appreciate copies of reports, budgets, advertising and promotional flyers, proposals, studies of effectiveness and/or retention rates, and other materials you'd be willing to share.

If you plan to be at CCCC in Boston, in March, I look forward to seeing you there. Have a safe trip.....

•Muriel Harris, editor

*....inside....*

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**Minimalist Tutoring:  
Making the Student  
Do All the Work**

A writing center worst-case scenario: A student comes in with a draft of a paper. It is reasonably well-written and is on a subject in which you have both expertise and interest. You point out the mechanical errors and suggest a number of improvements that could be made in the paper's organization; the student agrees and makes the changes. You supply some factual information that will strengthen the paper; the student incorporates it. You work hard, enjoy yourself, and when the student leaves, the paper is much improved. A week later, the student returns to the writing center to see you: "I got an A! Thanks for all your help!"

This scenario is hard to avoid, because it makes everyone involved feel good: the student goes away happy with a good grade, admiring you; you feel intelligent, useful, helpful – everything a good teacher ought to be. Everything about it seems right. That this is bad points out the central difficulty we

confront as tutors: we sit down with imperfect papers, but our job is to improve their writers.

When you "improve" a student's paper, you haven't been a tutor at all; you've been an editor. You may have been an exceedingly good editor, but you've been of little service to your student. I think most writing center tutors agree that we must not become editors for our students and that the goal of each tutoring session is learning, not a perfect paper. But faced with students who want us to "fix" their papers as well as our own desire to create "perfect" documents, we often find it easier and more satisfying to take charge, to muscle in on the student's paper, red pen in hand.

To avoid that trap, we need to make the student the primary agent in the writing center session. The student, not the tutor, should "own" the paper and take full responsibility for it. The tutor should take on a secondary role, serving mainly to keep the student focused on his own writing. A student who comes to the writing center and passively receives knowledge from a tutor will not be any closer to his own paper than he was when he walked in. He may leave with an improved paper, but he will not have learned much.

A writing teacher or tutor cannot and should not expect to make student papers "better"; that is neither our obligation, nor is it a realistic goal. The moment we consider it our duty to improve the paper, we automatically relegate ourselves to the role of editor.

If we can't fix papers, is there anything left for us to do? I would like to suggest that when we refuse to edit, we become more active than ever as educators. In the writing center, we have the luxury of time that the classroom teacher does not have. We can spend that time talking and listening, always focusing on the paper at hand. The primary value of the writing center tutor to the student is as a living human body who is willing to sit patiently and help the student spend time with her paper. This alone is more than most teachers can do, and will likely do as much to improve the paper as a hurried proofreader can. Second, we can talk to the student as an individual about the one paper before us. We can discuss strategies for effective writing and principles of structure, we can draw students' attention to features in their writing, and we can give them support and encouragement (writing papers, we shouldn't

forget, is a daunting activity).

### Assumptions

All of this can be painfully difficult to do. Every instinct we have tells us that we must work for perfection; likewise, students pressure us in the same direction. I have found two assumptions useful in keeping myself from editing student papers:

1. The most common difficulty for student writers is paying attention to their writing. Because of this, student papers seldom reflect their writers' full capabilities. Writing papers is a dull and unrewarding activity for most students, so they do it in noisy surroundings, at the last minute, their minds turning constantly to more pressing concerns. It is little wonder that so much student writing seems haphazard, unfocused, and disorganized. A good many errors are made that the student could easily have avoided. If we can get students to reread a paper even once before handing it in, in most cases we have rendered an improvement. We ought to encourage students to treat their own writings as texts that deserve the same kind of close attention we usually reserve for literary texts.

The **Writing Lab Newsletter**, published in ten monthly issues from September to June by the Department of English, Purdue University, is a publication of the National Writing Centers Association, an NCTE Assembly, and is a member of the NCTE Information Exchange Agreement. ISSN 1040-3779

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**Donations:** The newsletter is an informal publication with no billing procedures. Yearly donations of \$10.00 (U.S.\$15.00 in Canada) are requested to cover costs of duplicating and mailing. Please make all checks payable to Purdue University and send to the editor. Prepayment is requested from business offices.

**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.

Our message to students should be: "Your paper has value as a piece of writing. It is worth reading and thinking about like any other piece of writing."

2. While student writings are texts, they are unlike other texts in one important way: the process is far more important than the product. Most "real-world" writing has a goal beyond the page; anything that can be done to that writing to make it more effective ought to be done. Student writing, on the other hand, has no real goal beyond getting it on the page. In the real world when you need to have something important written "perfectly," you hire a professional writer; when a student hires a professional writer, it is a high crime called plagiarism.

This fairly obvious difference is something we often forget. We are so used to real-world writing, where perfection is paramount, that we forget that students write to learn, not to make perfect papers. Most writing teachers probably have a vision of a "perfect" freshman paper (it probably looks exactly like the pieces in the readers and wins a Bedford prize); we should probably resign ourselves to the fact that we will seldom see such a creature. Most students simply do not have the skill, experience, or talent to write the perfect paper.

### **Basic Minimalist Tutoring**

Given these assumptions, there are a number of concrete ways we can put theory into practice. Our body language will do more to signal our intentions (both to our students and to ourselves) than anything we say. These four steps should establish a tone that unmistakably shows that the paper belongs to the student and that the tutor is not an editor.

1. Sit beside the student, not across a desk — that is where job interviewers and other authorities sit. This first signal is important for showing the student that you are *not* the person "in charge" of the paper.
2. Try to get the student to be physically closer to her paper than you are. You should be, in a sense, an outsider, looking over her shoulder while she works on her paper.

3. If you are right-handed, sit on the student's right; this will make it more difficult for you to write on the paper. Better yet, don't let yourself have a pencil in your hand. By all means, if you must hold something, don't make it a red pen!
4. Have the student read the paper aloud to you, and suggest that he hold a pencil while doing so. Aside from saving your eyes in the case of bad handwriting, this will accomplish three things. First, it will bypass that awkward first few moments of the session when you are in complete control of the paper and the student is left out of the action while you read his paper. Second, this will actively involve the student in the paper, quite likely for the first time since he wrote it. I find that many students are able to find and correct usage errors, awkward wording, even logic problems without any prompting from me. Third, this will help establish the sometime slippery principle that good writing should sound good.

I am convinced that if you follow these four steps, even if you do nothing else, you will have served the student better than you would if you "edited" his paper.

### **Advanced Minimalist Tutoring**

Of course, there is quite a bit more you can do for the student in the time you have. You can use your keen intelligence and fine critical sense to help the student without directing the paper. As always, the main goal is to keep the student active and involved in the paper. I have three suggestions:

1. Concentrate on success in the paper, not failure. Make it a practice to find something nice to say about every paper, no matter how hard you have to search. This isn't easy to do; errors are what we usually focus on. But by pointing out to a student when he is doing something right, you reinforce behavior that may have started as a felicitous accident. This also demonstrates to the student that the paper is a "text" to be analyzed, with strengths as well as weaknesses. This is where

the tutor can radically depart from the role of editor.

2. Get the student to talk. It's her paper; she is the expert on it. Ask questions—perhaps “leading” questions— as often as possible. When there are sentence-level problems, make the student find and (if possible) correct them. When something is unclear, don't say, “This is unclear”; rather, say, “What do you mean by this?” Instead of saying, “You don't have a thesis,” ask the student, “Can you show me your thesis?” “What's your reason for putting Q before N?” is more effective than “N should have come before Q.” It is much easier to point out mistakes than it is to point the student toward finding them, but your questions will do much more to establish the student as sole owner of the paper and you as merely an interested outsider.
3. If you have the time during your session, give the student a discrete writing task, then go away for a few minutes and let him do it. For instance, having established that the paper has no thesis, tell the student to write the thesis while you step outside for a few minutes. The fact that you will return and see what he has accomplished (or not accomplished) will force him to work on the task you have given him probably with more concentration than he usually gives his writing. For most students, the only deadline pressure for their paper is the teacher's final due date. Any experienced writer knows that a deadline is the ultimate energizer. Creating that energy for a small part of the paper is almost the best favor you can do for a student.

### ***Defensive Minimalist Tutoring***

So far, I have been assuming that the student is cooperative or at least open to whatever methods you might use. This, of course, is not a very realistic assumption. There are many students who fight a non-editing tutor all the way. They know you know how to fix their paper, and that is what they came to have done. Some find ingenious ways of forcing you into the role of editor: some withdraw from the paper, leaving it in front of

you; some refuse to write anything down until you tell them word for word what to write; others will keep asking you questions (“What should I do here? Is this part okay?”). Don't underestimate the abilities of these students; they will fatigue you into submission if they can.

To fight back, I would suggest we learn some techniques from the experts: the uncooperative students themselves.

1. Borrow student body language. When a student doesn't want to be involved in his paper, he will slump back in his chair, getting as far away from it as possible. If you find a student pushing you too hard into editing his paper, physically move away from it— slump back into your chair or scoot away. If a student is making a productive session impossible with his demands, yawn, look at the clock, rearrange your things. This language will speak clearly to the student: “You cannot make me edit your paper.”
2. Be completely honest with the student who is giving you a hard time. If she says, “What should I do here?” you can say in a friendly, non-threatening way, “I can't tell you that— it's your grade, not mine,” or, “I don't know— it's *your* paper.” I have found this approach doesn't upset students as it might seem it would; they know what they are doing, and when you show that you know too, they accept that.

All of the suggestions I have made should be just a beginning of the ideas we can use to improve our value to our students. I hope that they lead to other ideas and tutoring techniques.

The less we do *to* the paper, the better. Our primary object in the writing center session is not the paper, but the student. Fixing flawed papers is easy; showing the students how to fix their own papers is complex and difficult. Ideally, the student should be the only active agent in improving the paper. The tutor's activity should focus on the student. If, at the end of the session, a paper is improved, it should be because the student did all the work.

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## Creative Writing and the Writing Center

Many readers of "creative" work, if they are not creative writers themselves, feel it is often difficult to discuss such work with that writer, particularly if he/she is a student, probably an adolescent. The instructor in the writing center, when presented with student creative writing, is in a difficult position. One wants to be honest but one also wants to be encouraging. Writing center instructors may not feel they have the expertise to accurately critique a student's poem, story, script, or play. Nevertheless, what the student needs, ultimately, is a sensitive reader, one who is willing to ask questions, show concern, and gently push the student to ask his/her own questions, not to settle for the approximate word or the general feeling. Perhaps the instructor in the writing center is not so different from the creative writing instructor. Both are after the same goal: the integrity of the language as suggested by the student's willingness to revise, the encouragement of the student not to settle for the approximate but to fight for the best diction he/she can find, and the student's consideration of how he/she is communicating with one reader, how he/she is considering audience.

The issues that a writing center instructor considers are not so different from those that a creative writing teacher considers. One of the major struggles a creative writing teacher has is to get students to pay more attention to each word. In a poem, story, script, or play, the word itself is sanctuary, home, and water. This, then, is no different from what any writing center instructor faces each day—we fight to make the student aware that language matters, that word choice is no accident, that the person who truly wishes to communicate will not settle for "close" but will continuously ask how the word may be made more exact, more awake.

I am a poet, or should I say a writer of poetry? My creative writing students are sometimes easily discouraged, but this discouragement is often expressed as arrogance, fear, or even a mistrust of adults who just won't see "the truth" of what they have to say. Something inside them may be saying, "I am not up

to this kind of work." We should not want them to wallow in this attitude; rather, we should encourage them to keep hunting for the best (as opposed to the easiest) way to convey their feelings.

In the writing center, I have read many narrative essays. It is always surprising to me that, through the act of writing, many students show us much vulnerability. They want us to encourage them but they do not want to be lied to. Creative work, in this respect, is no different from any other kind of writing. A short story, a poem, a play, or a script may not be to every reader's liking. Many students put something down and think that just because that initial effort has been made, the work is somehow near to being complete. This is not a problem for someone in the writing center—it is actually an opportunity. We know that students come to us because they know their writing is less effective than it could be, or their instructor has told them that they must come to see us for help, and we try to give the kind of help which will, ultimately, bring the essay out of the shadows of precision and into the light. Poems, stories, plays and scripts are no different. Diction matters! Word choice is at the root of any creative work.

Moreover, as educated people, each of us is a strong reader for student creative work. What applies in freshman composition, technical writing, journalism, and advanced prose writing also applies in creative writing—are you communicating? who is your audience? are you using the best possible word in the best possible place? Confusion is not the reader's problem; it is the writer's problem.

Any question we can ask students about why they chose a certain phrase, used punctuation, or developed a paragraph, stanza, or scene in a script or a play is helpful. If we read something and we are confused by the student's approach to the subject, we should not hesitate to say so, tactfully yet clearly. They want and deserve our honesty.

One difficulty a writing center instructor may find when dealing with student creative

writing is that the student's ego is often easily bruised. Students who may be very cooperative when we talk with them about an essay for freshman composition may be more defensive about their own creative work. We need to develop a sensitivity to this kind of fear. Sometimes a student may seem hostile to our remarks about his/her work, but the student is actually displaying the same kind of fear any writer experiences sooner or later—what if my work really isn't very good? What if, in fact, the piece needs so much work that I won't be able to make it come alive?

We do not want to discourage students; to make them feel the vulnerability expressed in the creative work is not something to strive for. Creative writing, in any genre, involves some self-revelation. Students may be probing into areas they usually keep in the dark. On the other hand, we do not want to encourage mediocrity. We can offer the student who comes to us in the writing center the best kind of tool a creative writer needs—helping the student to ask (and listen to) questions.

For the time when we are doing the work with the student, *we* are the audience. We need to let the student know that we are both after the same goal—strengthening the writing, making it as effective as possible. Perhaps this can diffuse some of the defensiveness the student may feel. Even if we get them to talk at all about what they are attempting to accomplish, to verbalize, in the piece, it is a victory. Talking is an act of shaping. It is a way of moving from the general into the specific—and this is the goal any creative writing teacher has.

Sometimes students will, point-blank, ask us if we “understand” what they are trying to say. When we don't know, we should say so—not apologetically or mistrustfully—but our confusion is something the student may learn from. Perhaps the only people (if any) the student has shown the work to are a close friend, a parent, or a sibling. This “readymade” audience is almost always blindly positive. No writer, student or otherwise, enjoys hearing that his/her work did not communicate. Sometimes we cannot say why as specifically as we would like to, but perhaps working with students and really listening to what they are trying to say can be a way of making them ask more of the work itself. The writer, ultimately, has the obligation to communicate.

Developing a sensitivity to the needs of the young creative writer becomes easier when we learn how to engage students in conversation about their work. We want to show students that we are interested in their struggles with language. Sometimes drawing the student out can be troublesome. As with the students who come to us with their freshman composition essays, the creative writer may not be very clear (or sure of) what it is he/she wants to communicate.

One way to help students to focus their ideas on the chosen subject is to first ask what kinds of writing the teacher is asking the class to do. For example, a student may be given an assignment in a fiction writing class on using a first-person point of view. The student may be able to repeat what the assignment is, but may be less able to articulate what words such as “first person” or “point of view” mean. Similarly, a poet may have been told to write a poem in “free verse”; sometimes the student may not have understood (or listened well enough) in class what a term such as that means. If writing center instructors are also unsure of the terminology, they can ask instructors for some help, ask the student to consult class notes, or look up the words in a sourcebook. The writing center often has a great variety of readers and literary anthologies and books on grammar and style, technical writing, and communications. It would be good if some basic texts on creative writing were also included—handbooks which explain terminology, books which could help clarify simply and quickly, such as Fussell's *Writing Fiction* or Deutsch's *Poetry Handbook*.

In addition to helping students to clarify what they are trying to do in creative work, we also want to encourage their creative impulses without encouraging bad writing. A cliché is a cliché whether it appears in a poem, story, feature story, or English 101 essay. Writing that lacks detail and precision will be weak—putting the magic words “creative writing” over those problems does not help. Many times a student who is feeling particularly on guard will respond to our questions with the remark, “But I meant it to be that way.” We don't want to encourage students to change their work merely to fit our specifications, but we do want them to become more aware of audience, more aware that any good writing requires work—not just bailing out with the easiest word or the phrase which first comes to mind.

Moreover, we need to be aware that many students who show us their creative work are taking a creative writing class for the first time. A student who could get through English 101 with minimal problems may not find the same kind of situation in a creative writing class. One student, who is taking his first creative writing class this semester, told me a six-line poem took him five hours to write. The work was rather imprecise, but we do want to acknowledge the effort, show the student that, as people who are concerned with good writing, we empathize with the struggle.

The writing center can be important in other ways to a university's creative writing program. Often, no matter if the university is large or small, the creative writers have a hard time finding each other. Some writers may get to know each other a little in a creative writing class and then find that they have no group to depend upon after the class ends. Writers need encouragement, the kind of encouragement which comes from talking and sharing work. This kind of support can be at least as important as the classroom.

At Widener University, some creative writers on the faculty and some interested students decided to commit themselves to having a weekly meeting to discuss creative work. There was much enthusiasm for having this kind of group; unfortunately, it was difficult to find a place in which the group could consistently meet. Another dilemma was that there were some time conflicts—times which were fine for some were poor for others.

The group turned to the Writing Center to see if they could find some space to meet once a week. The Director of the Writing Center was completely supportive. She even gave one of the staff members one hour of release each week to run the group's meetings and to show her support of creative writing. That was a year and a half ago, and the creative writing group is still thriving today, thanks in large part to the Writing Center.

A creative writing group can also benefit the writing center by making more students aware of its presence on campus. Students who may be shy about coming to the writing center may be less shy after going there for the creative writing group.

In conclusion, members of the creative

writing program and members of the composition program need to find more common ground, become more aware of each other's needs. The writing center is the kind of place where this kind of constructive work can occur. Creative writing teachers need to encourage their students to make use of the facilities in the writing center. Likewise, instructors in the writing center need to continue developing a sensitivity to student creative work. Both the instructor and the student are working toward the same goals—the strengthening of the student's writing skill and giving the student honest help to this end.

No teacher can be all things to all people. Each member of the writing center staff inevitably has his/her own areas of expertise. This kind of diversity gives breadth and depth. It increases the number of ways in which the writing center can be of service to students. Instructors need to be aware of these different strengths and to be able to make good use of them by asking questions. Students enrolled in creative writing classes need to know that they too have much to gain by making use of the writing center's services. We are not a quick fix for a torn poem, a two-minute stitch job for a faulty play or story. However, through our questions, concern, and honest responses, we have much to offer the creative writer. The more students are able to articulate their thinking about the creative work, the sharper the work will, in the long run, become.

Kenneth G. Pobo  
Widener University  
Chester, PA

### Call For Manuscripts

Roxbury is a small, growing press seeking to publish new, distinctive, cutting-edge textbooks for use in writing labs and writing centers. We are interested in main texts and supplemental texts such as workbooks, readers, etc. Contact Claude Teweles, Executive Editor, if interested, at Roxbury Publishing Company, P.O. Box 491044, Los Angeles, California 90049 (213-653-1068; FAX: 213-653-4140).

**Call for Papers  
3rd Annual Conference  
of the  
Mid-Atlantic Writing  
Centers Association**

**April 6, 1991  
Philadelphia**

***"Teaching, Technology, and Research"***

Individual presentations should be limited to 20 minutes. Panels should be limited to 60 minutes. Send one-page substantive abstract by March 1 to Georgianne McVay, Director of the Writing Center, Philadelphia College of Pharmacy and Science, Philadelphia, PA 19104. Inquiries: 215-596-8909.

**20th Wyoming Conference on  
English**

**June 24-28, 1991  
Laramie, Wyoming**

***"Writing and Teaching in the Material World"***

Contact: Bruce Richardson, Department of English, P.O. Box 3353, University of Wyoming, Laramie, WY 82701 (307-766-6486).

**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 6: Mid-Atlantic Writing Centers Association, in Philadelphia, PA

Contact: Georgianne McVay, Writing Center, Philadelphia College of Pharmacy and Science, Philadelphia, PA 19104

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

May 3-4: East Central Writing Centers Association, in Highland Heights, KY.

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

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

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



## Tutors' Column

### Have You Heard What Your Students Have Been Saying?

Listening is a powerful element in tutoring which we often take for granted. Ironically, it's the element of communication we use the most yet often recognize the least. Any tutoring session can be improved by using listening effectively. In fact, when tutors continuously make the effort to use it, they'll find that it is a very versatile and helpful tool. It may seem odd that something so common can be so powerful; however, everyday experience can demonstrate how important effective listening can be in a tutorial.

We've all experienced effective listening when a listener really understood what we've said. It's as though the listener told us, "Your ideas are worthy of my attention. I think they are important, and I think you are important." This is different from ordinary listening because the listener made a sincere effort to understand what we said. Unfortunately, we've also experienced someone who listened very ineffectively to us. People like this keep discussing what they want to talk about or simply ignore us, continuing what they are doing. Sometimes, this can leave us feeling abandoned or even insulted. It's as though we've been told that our words had no importance.

Realizing our feelings when we have or haven't been listened to can help us understand how important listening is in tutoring. The students we tutor will react the same way we do to good or bad listening. If we listen effectively, students will get the same positive feeling we get when someone effectively listens to us. They will feel more comfortable expressing ideas because they will know that we want to hear what is being said. However, the opposite reaction will happen if we listen poorly. Students will feel abandoned or insulted just as we do when we are not listened to. Thus, students will develop negative feelings about tutoring and express fewer ideas, and sessions will become less productive.

A key element to effective listening is trust. Tutors must trust that if a student with a problem is given a chance to discuss it, that student may solve the problem using his or her own intelligence and experience. Students who have problems writing English aren't ignorant of the English language. They know much about it and use it every day. Often, all that is needed to solve a student's writing problem may be to listen effectively so that the student can piece together an answer.

Another advantage of effective listening is that we can use our tutoring and writing experience to listen more effectively. Writing and listening share these principles: both improve when variety and creativity are used; both improve when a person is willing to work to improve them; and both improve when a person is persistent at learning them. Because these principles are common in writing, it's easy to see how they apply to listening.

Variety improves effective listening in the same way that it improves prose. Just as people become bored reading repetitious prose, people also get bored talking to repetitious listeners. We've all spoken to someone who always responds with the same comment. Some of these are "Uh-Huh," "OK," or "Yeah." There's nothing wrong with these responses when they're used in proportion with other responses. But, when they're used continually, they can be annoying. Other effective responses are repeating a key part in a person's statement, paraphrasing, or keeping silent.

Repeating a key part in a student's statement is useful when a student is beginning to understand the ideas being covered but is still hesitant to discuss them. Ideally, the tutor should repeat the word or words that are the core of the student's statement. If a student says, "Commas, they seem to separate independent clauses," the student hasn't

described all the information about the role of using commas to separate independent clauses. But, if the tutor repeats the key work "separate," it's likely the student will continue to say, "Yes, when the independent clauses are connected by a word like 'and,' 'but,' or 'or.'" Of course, it doesn't work this smoothly every time, but repeating a key part of a student's statement is an effective way to keep a student talking about an idea.

Paraphrasing is repeating what a student said in your own words, and it works well when a student is comfortable discussing the material being covered. If a student says, "I understand now, the thesis is like an opinion that is the central idea in my essay," a tutor may respond with the paraphrase, "Yes, it's an arguable statement your essay is going to support." Paraphrasing is particularly effective because it assures the student that the tutor clearly understood what the student said. When tutors use paraphrasing, they should wait for a natural break in the student's speech. Otherwise, they will disturb the momentum students develop when they are learning new ideas by talking about them.

Silence works well when students face challenges they can solve themselves. Using it shows students that we're willing to let them sort through their knowledge of writing, so they can create intelligent responses. If you feel awkward being silent while a student is working, do something like completing paperwork or getting a cup of coffee.

It's obvious that effective listening is not passive or idle; it requires work. Some of the work is keeping silent, paraphrasing, or repeating a part of a student's statement. But when tutors make the effort to use effective listening, it can bring many advantages to tutoring. When it is used, students will express more ideas, they may solve their own writing problems, and the tutor will gain valuable information about the student's understanding of writing.

Steve Malikowski  
Peer Tutor  
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St. Cloud, MN

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## Materials Exchange Board

The following writing lab directors have indicated a willingness to share their materials. Since this is a drain on budgets, please include reimbursement (and stamped envelopes as requested). If you are willing to share some of your materials, please write to the newsletter editor, indicating: 1) what materials you have to share, 2) what the cost will be, and 3) who the contact person is.

### 1. **High School:** The Write Place at Burlington Community High School

**Materials to share:** A cover letter offering an overview of the Write Place's history and goals, a list of services available in the Write Place, a list of topics the staff can offer as conference/convention or on-site staff development sessions, and a list of materials available through the Write Place

**Contact person:** Jim Upton, The Write Place, Burlington Community High School, 421 Terrace Drive, Burlington, Iowa 52601 (319-753-2211)

**Cost:** Single items in the materials list: \$1. For several items, contact Jim Upton first for total costs.

### 2. **University:** The Writing Lab at Purdue University

**Materials to share:** yearly report, publicity flyers, instructional handouts

**Contact person:** Muriel Harris, Dept. of English, Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana 47907 (317-494-3723).

**Cost:** For a copy of 1) the yearly report, 2) publicity flyers, and /or 3) a list of instructional handouts: \$2 each for the three items listed above (or \$6 for all three sets), plus self-addressed 8 1/2 x 11 envelope with \$.45 postage attached. Individual handouts on the list of instructional materials are \$1 each (or \$.50 each for five or more).

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## National Writing Centers Association News

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### Message From the President

Our National Writing Centers Association workshop at NCTE in Atlanta was quite a success with 64 elementary, middle school, secondary, and college-level participants involved. I wish to thank Pat Dyer of Widener University, Lou Marchesano of Rocky Mountain High School, and Jim Upton of Burlington Community High School for their help with the full-day workshop.

Pat Dyer, first vice president, will chair the session at CCCC in Boston on Thursday, March 21 from 6:30-7:45 p.m. The topic is "Diversity at the Writing Center," so circle the date on your calendar! At our Executive Board meeting in Boston, we will be accepting any last-minute nominations for openings on the Executive Board. This year we will elect new high school and two-year college representatives. Also, we have openings for four at-large positions which may be filled by elementary, middle school, secondary, or college-level people. We would like to have representation that reflects our entire constituency. If you would like to send me a nomination before March 21, please list the person's name, address, and school affiliation.

Also, I am really excited about our writing center directory. Please don't hesitate to make copies of the form on page 12 to distribute to others. Just make sure you send me your form as soon as possible. We would like to print copies to be made available in September 1991, so we need your listing by May.

Finally, if you have a concern or issue which you think NWCA should address, please call or write me. Your Executive Board needs to know how to best serve you. If you would like to offer your services for a presentation or workshop, we need to know that, too. We need you!

I look forward to hearing from you and seeing many of you in Boston.

Pamela B. Farrell, NWCA President  
12 Essex Drive  
Little Silver, NJ 07739  
(201) 842-1411

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### National Writing Centers Association Outstanding Service Award

Nominations for this award shall be considered by the National Writing Centers Association every three years beginning in 1991 to honor an individual who has made an outstanding contribution to the Association and to the writing center profession in general.

### Committee

The committee who chooses the winner will be made up of past winners of this award and should number five total. If five winners are not available to serve on this committee, then the remaining positions on the committee shall be filled in this order: president, first vice president, second vice president.

### Procedure

The president will call for nominations at the NCTE board meeting held in the year prior to the one in which the award is being given. The call for nominations shall also appear in the *Writing Lab Newsletter* and in the fall issue of *The Writing Center Journal*. A call for nominations will be sent to all members in early December.

Anyone who wishes to nominate a member should submit a letter of nomination which includes the nominee's current academic assignment, offices held, conferences participated in, articles published, etc. The nominator may also want to include pertinent anecdotal evidence.

The nomination should be followed by two letters of support from people who have worked closely with the nominee. All nominations and supporting letters must be received by the current president by January 31st of the year in which the award will be given.

The president will duplicate and distribute the nominating letters and the committee will decide on a winner. The award will be presented at the Writing Centers Special Interest Group Meeting at CCCC.

## Writing Center Directory

State \_\_\_\_\_ Enrollment \_\_\_\_\_

School \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_ Elementary, Middle, High School, or College

\_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number \_\_\_\_\_ Contact Person \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Center \_\_\_\_\_

How is the center funded? \_\_\_\_\_

Is it affiliated with another institutional unit (department, program, etc.)? \_\_\_\_\_

If so, please indicate affiliation \_\_\_\_\_

Center has existed \_\_\_\_\_ years. It is open \_\_\_\_\_ hours per week.

Staff includes \_\_\_\_\_

If staff includes peer tutors, number of tutors \_\_\_\_\_

Tutors work \_\_\_\_\_ hours per week. How are tutors compensated? \_\_\_\_\_

Please explain tutor selection process, training and evaluation \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Center purpose \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Population the center serves \_\_\_\_\_

Percentage of student body served \_\_\_\_\_ Student use (referral, drop-in, appointment, re-  
quirement?) \_\_\_\_\_

List materials available \_\_\_\_\_

If computers are available, please give numbers, brands and uses \_\_\_\_\_

Software used \_\_\_\_\_

Any unique characteristics of center \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Please complete by May and return to:  
Pamela B. Farrell, NWCA President  
12 Essex Drive  
Little Silver, New Jersey 07739  
You will be notified when the directory is available.  
Thank you for your assistance.**

## Techniques for Assisting Adult Students Returning to Formal Education

*"I came for some help with my writing because my skills are so rusty. That's because I've been out of school for many years, and I think all the rules have changed."*

*"I got my associate's degree many years ago and just recently decided to come back and finish my bachelor's. I've had years of practical experience with what I'm writing about here, so I know what I'm talking about. My professor, though, marked this paper all up and said I should come to the writing center for some help."*

*"I'm here because my professor asked us to do our papers on word processors or computers, and I've never used those kinds of things. As a matter of fact, they scare me. Can you help me out?"*

Adult students returning to formal education enter the writing center with different greetings and explanations and request assistance with various writing skills. Many of these students, however, display similarities in attitude and writing problems that relate to their similar circumstances. And writing center instructors who recognize these common circumstances can apply appropriate sensitivity and offer them beneficial writing suggestions.

For instance, many adult students are fearful that they have become "out of touch" with writing in their years away from formal education. For them, coming back to school and receiving numerous assignments is an overwhelming experience. They may know enough about their chosen subject to write informative, interesting papers, but they question their judgment and are apprehensive about writing down ideas. These students often ask for assurance to validate their views—before daring to present them on paper.

They may repeatedly ask, "Does that sound stupid?" Or they may offer apprehensive statements such as, "I'm really not certain I know enough about this topic to write about it." Even with reassurance and assistance, some students let their apprehension prevent them from writing altogether. To cite an ex-

treme example, one anxious adult student who attended the Widener University Writing Center came not because she had not understood the material she was assigned to write on or completed the appropriate reading assignments, but because she was anxious about actually writing down her research findings and ideas. She would not turn in the required papers for her courses and ended up with numerous "incomplete" grades because she feared turning in formal written work.

It is important that instructors working with these students create a friendly atmosphere in which such students can bring up their views for discussion without fear of intimidation. There is seldom need for a loud, quickly conclusive "Poor Argument!" from a writing center instructor when discussing these students' views. Though these students may have experienced and informally discussed such issues in their years away from school, they are uncertain about presenting ideas on a formal basis, written and supported in a paper that will even be graded. Writing center instructors, then, help by discussing the student's ideas to make certain they are logical and can be well supported. It is often helpful to verbally review the student's thesis and major supporting ideas before beginning to look at the written work.

Both to ease her students' fears and help improve their writing, one professor at Widener University brings her Transitional Education students to the writing center for one class period of actual paper writing. The students bring with them drafts to review. And while some students work with writing center instructors, others work on their papers at computer terminals. This group approach is helpful for a few reasons. One is that apprehensive students are comfortable writing and discussing their papers simply because their other class members are with them, doing the same. Plus, the instructors reinforce the suggestions and comments their professor has made in class and on their previous papers. Finally, by doing this the professor makes certain her students are organizing and revising ideas with writing center supervision, which improves the quality of the papers they submit.

It is also important that writing center instructors allow students to see gaps between their ideas and lack of support when the ideas really are not logical or persuasive. Though some unsure adult students request much positive feedback, they will best benefit from sessions in which they learn to see both their strong and weak arguments. Otherwise, these students may repeatedly use—yes, overuse—their writing center instructors. For example, some who have assignments that require no writing, for classes such as Methods in Education, come into the writing center for “help,” meaning, again, verbal reassurance. When they repeatedly attend for mere confirmation of ideas, they are not progressing toward self-confidence and understanding. Rather, they are using the writing center as a crutch. Writing center instructors who ask questions that require the students themselves to notice whether the ideas are coherent can be of more benefit in the long run than instructors who offer instant feedback about each idea, positive or negative. Practice allows the students to then analyze their ideas—with assurance and confidence. Consequently, fears about writing their ideas will lessen.

Another helpful remedy for this situation is that the student meet with the same instructor in the writing center. If the writing center sets appointments in advance, and if the student would benefit from regular sessions, this can usually be accomplished. It allows the student to become familiar enough with the instructor to feel confident bringing up ideas. In writing centers staffed with professors, it also helps the student “dare” to discuss ideas with someone on a comparable level to that of the professor to whom the paper will be submitted. And it helps the instructor become familiar with the patterns of the student. The instructor can then ask the important questions: Does the student continue to request positive feedback before presenting an idea? Is the student learning to point out strong and weak points with fewer comments from the instructor? And the instructor can then best determine the student’s progress.

A second common type of adult student has no anxiety about voicing ideas. After all, these students argue, they have personally experienced; they know someone who has experienced; or, never mind the experience, they just know about these things. Sometimes, when they enter the writing center, they enter

only because their professor required it. And sometimes they enter with a grudge.

First, when these students enter, it is important that the instructor working with them tries to lessen the “grudge.” The instructor should not criticize the professor or the assignment, and thereby intensify the grudge. When I was a composition teacher and recommended that one of my students go for help before revising her paper, I received a note from her peer tutor at that university’s writing center. The note criticized my teaching methods, in the time allotted to the student for revision. Though the writing center tutor or instructor can, if necessary, contact the professor with questions, it is detrimental to students’ attitude and progress if throughout the writing center session a student and instructor choose to exchange negative comments. Such practices do not help students notice their writing problems; they only detract from the purpose of the writing center. Instead of intensifying a student’s grudge, writing center personnel should express interest in the paper’s ideas and written presentation and go directly to work finding which areas need improvement.

One common problem the writing center instructor working with this type of student may notice is that though the student’s ideas are definite in the student’s mind, they are not communicated clearly. True, this is a problem in papers of many other students as well, but often it is especially important to note in the writing of adult students because many are convinced that their “experience” or “knowledge” alone somehow communicates and validates their points. For instance, some may have encountered a situation in a business office like the one they are writing about, so they figure that their ideas about that subject are automatically understood as “correct.” Instructors reviewing these types of papers should step back and begin a discussion of the basic ideas in the paper. Again, the instructors should ask questions that require the students to say—and then write—exactly what they mean. Talking about their ideas may enable them to see the importance of using exact words, clear sentences, and complete paragraphs that convey those ideas. Answering pointed questions may help them stop assuming that an idea is conveyed clearly just because they have experience with the subject.

A second problem that often occurs is that the ideas are communicated but they are not supported with specifics. This may stem from the circumstance that in informal discussion these students have offered interesting ideas, but they have not been required to specifically support those ideas. Again, apt questions from instructors can help these students see the need for back-up information in the written presentation of ideas. "How did you come to this conclusion?" "Do you know an example that illustrates this idea?" Just pinpointing the valuable experience that made these students confident about communicating a topic in the first place can help them understand ways to convey the lessons learned.

Also, some students may benefit from reminders of how to organize ideas, stating them in general terms and supporting each with specifics. One quick way some instructors review this concept is by drawing the "shape" of the information in paragraphs. In this technique, triangles outline the generally well-developed paragraphs, either leading into or out of the base (topic sentence) opposite the apex (specifics). Paragraphs that state general ideas but lack support can be depicted, then, as squares because they state a general idea but do not complete their intended topics. Questioning the students and drawing paragraph shapes are a few ways to help these students learn to see that their ideas are not communicated clearly if they lack support.

Third, many adult students who "know" their material but are required to attend the writing center have specific technical errors that stop the ideas from being communicated clearly. These may benefit from working on the most prominent errors first, with the instructor explaining the rules associated with each and offering suggestions on how to make the writing technically correct. As with other students, these may benefit from assignments dealing with particular grammatical or punctuation problems. This depends, of course, on the prevalence of the problems and the previous understanding of the students. After a quick review explanation by the instructor, many adult students learn to point out these errors themselves and avoid including them in future writing assignments. "Oh yes. Now I remember learning that" is a common response to such helpful explanations. It may be important for these students just to review conventions and rules they may have forgotten.

One function of many writing centers, like the one at Widener University, is to provide computer orientations which help students learn to do their papers on computers. People who learn to complete their assignments on computers often find the writing process easier—and they learn quickly to take advantage of such aids as easy revisions and automatic spelling checks. Many adult students returning to formal education come for such a computer orientation to fulfill a class assignment. These students often come with some "computer anxiety." They may begin with statements explaining that they have never used computers before: "They didn't even have these things when I was in school."

When writing center instructors work with these students, it is helpful to first offer a simple, streamlined orientation during which the students sit in front of the terminal and perform the basic functions themselves. At Widener, for example, we assist students in booting up, beginning a document, and understanding formatting and some basic commands often used when writing papers and printing. These basic computer orientations generally take only twenty to thirty minutes to complete, but by personally performing these basic activities, the students begin to become familiar with word processing. And then "those complicated computers" begin to seem accessible and helpful.

During these orientations, the instructors should avoid assuming that the students automatically know the function of keys. They should point out what things the arrows, insertion, deletion, and other keys not found on typewriters do. I learned this when one adult student came for assistance with revision on a paper that had been written on a computer and marked by her professor. When we found errors, such as spacing problems, she acknowledged that she knew they were there, but she did not know she could fix them on the computer! She had merely "typed" and printed her paper, then turned it in, of course missing out on one of the types of assistance word processing provides.

Another adult student, after the preliminary orientation, printed the document she had just created, then asked me if she would have to take it home and retype it on her typewriter before she could turn it in. "It seems too easy this way," she claimed. Then skeptically she

added, "Are you sure this isn't cheating?" Detailed explanation of such computer functions can indeed be helpful.

As with the students constantly asking for positive feedback, some students learning word processing in the writing center want repeated explanations. One this semester came for four different "computer orientation" appointments, wanting to hear such basic information as how to handle the disks and which drives to put them in each time she came. One practice that will lead students to trust their own abilities instead of asking so many questions is to put a "reminder" card at each computer terminal. At Widener, these reminder cards review—very specifically, and by numbered steps—how to "boot up" the computer and begin a document. Then unsure students can glance at the card instead of asking for help once they are fairly well acquainted with the basics of word processing, and they can improve their writing through understanding the options available to them.

Many adult students enter the writing center. Of course, their specific circumstances

determine their exact writing problems, but many display a few common similarities that writing center instructors would best learn to recognize. Some are unsure of their "unused" writing skills and come searching for feedback before they incorporate ideas onto paper. Others come on assignment, confident of their paper topics but having trouble communicating their ideas and needing reminders of certain writing conventions, such as backing up their major ideas with support specifics. Still others come to learn "computer-age" writing and they benefit from hands-on, basic introductions with carefully detailed explanations from their instructors. Regardless of their apprehension or writing proficiency, though, when these students do come to the writing center, it is important they realize the center is not a "crutch," or a "punishment," but a useful tool that can help them make a smooth transition to formal education—and to writing.

Robyn Parry  
Widener University  
Chester, PA

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**WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER**

*Muriel Harris, editor*  
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*Purdue University*  
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