

The **WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER**

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

Volume 15, Number 7

March, 1991

....from the editor....

In this month's newsletter, you'll find several items with an overlapping focus. Accompanying Gail Lewis Tubbs' lead article on the teaching of grammar is a conference announcement on the teaching of grammar.

Similarly, Greg Lyons' article on writing activities for tutors, which offers both a rationale and some specifics on formal writing tasks for tutors, follows a Tutors' Column with two columnists this month, Tammy Griffin and Judith Renaud. Many of the Tutors' Column essays that are sent in are the result of tutors' writing assignments in their training groups. So, keep the Tutors' Column in mind as one audience for your tutors' writing. Feedback from newsletter readers suggests that in many writing labs, the tutors dive straight for the Tutors' Column when a new issue of the newsletter arrives.

And with all the conference announcements in the following pages, many of us will surely have some pleasant face-to-face encounters in coming months.

•Muriel Harris, editor

....inside....

A Case for Teaching Grammar to Writers
•Gail Lewis Tubbs 1

Business Communication Meets in the Writing Center: A Successful Four-Week Course
•Patricia M. Dyer 4

Conference Announcements and Calendar 7

Tutors' Column
•Tammy Griffin 9
•Judith Renaud 11

A Midwife's Guide to Writing for Learning Assignments
•James Upton 12

Writing Activities for Writers
•Greg Lyons 14

A Case for Teaching Grammar to Writers

I teach in the writing program of a small, liberal arts school that works hard to stress writing skills in every corner of its curriculum. We are all in general, and our office in particular, devoted to the beliefs that writing is a learning tool, that it is a process, that both pre-writing and revision are integral to that process, that student writers benefit from working with a non-evaluative, expert reader, that every writer can improve. We care about content. Students who come for conferences to the Writing Workshop can spend a long time with a tutor discussing the direction the paper is taking, the order in which the argument is evolving, the support and detail emerging, the thesis appearing. Finally, however, the inescapable moment arrives; we must confront the task of editing for mechanics and style.

At such a moment, I devoutly wish that we had a common grammatical vocabulary. But more often than not, expressions such as "clause," "passive voice," "participle" evoke

confusion, not to say alarm, or at best a kind of glazed nod. I am left to say lamely: "You see that string of words that begins with 'when' at the beginning of your sentence? Well, that needs a comma to set it off from the rest of the sentence. You want to know why? It's an introductory adverb clause. . . ." Even if I were inclined to teach the adverb on the spot, and what a clause is, and why the comma is necessary only when the clause begins the sentence, not when it ends it, such a digression would hardly be economical or instructive. I must invent a language less precise than that which is my heritage as a refugee from a 1950's grammar school education.

The teaching of grammar has become increasingly déclassé during the last twenty years. When I entered the public schools as a teacher in the early 1960's, carrying my eighth-grade legacy of two hours of grammar-just-before-lunch with the formidable Miss Dunne, traditional grammar was bowing before structural linguistics. We were to be descriptive rather than prescriptive. We were to call nouns "form class one" and articles "noun markers." It didn't take me long to figure out that nothing had really changed except that the labels were less Latinized and the approach more collaborative, both commendable aims. The upshot, however, was that as a result of the change in vocabulary and the temporary dearth of texts, all over the country both students and teachers of English felt confused and off balance. The natural inclination was to avoid the subject of grammar entirely, particularly as the climate was friendly toward seeing its study as a useless exercise. The usual percentage of these students became English teachers, and the next generation blithely ignored grammatical tedium, comforted by studies suggesting that learning grammar is not only ineffective in improving writing but may actually be a deterrent.

We begin to hear rumblings, however. Why does the "research" say that a knowledge of grammar has no effect on writing when persuasive voices argue that we need to master language or it will master us? In an article in the September 24, 1989 issue of the *New York Times Magazine* ("The Prince's English"), Malcolm Bradbury says:

Through language we control and create the world. We name it into existence, shape life into sense, give meaning to chaos. From our deploy-

ment of nouns and verbs, declensions and tenses, we connect our particular sense of the self to time through our use of the past, the present, and the future. We lay our tongues over space and time, over outer geography and inner psychology. We discover life through language, and that—as all great writers have told us—is why we must master it.

That sounds like grammar to me. And it doesn't sound dull. What kind of a world will we have when there are no Malcolm Bradburys to name precisely the parts of the language that relate to the whole of human experience because no one remembers the names of the parts?

Maybe the research is not selective enough. Or maybe numbers are not relevant to a discussion of how the language is honed. The truth is that many people are not accomplished writers. They will never write skillfully, with or without instruction in grammar. But what about those few people who will be the writers, whose work traditionally has enriched the culture? What happens when we deprive them of a disciplined understanding of the way their language works? It seems to me that the deprivation will lead to the same kind of alienation that we feel from other tools that we use but don't fully understand. The instrument we

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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.

use becomes blunter as our connection to it becomes more tenuous.

I can't identify, much less analyze, the various creaks and clunks my car's engine makes, but I expect the mechanic who works on it, the expert, to be able to take it apart and put it back together in better than original shape. And I would wager that he feels more in control of his car than I do of mine. I like my car, but I don't always understand it—it can be vaguely threatening. The computer on which I am typing this is, perhaps, a still more appropriate example of a tool for which my profound affection is tempered by my sense that it lives a life of its own, whose mysteries I can never hope to penetrate. Even the battery of computer experts on campus are periodically vague about what its various bleeps and bombs signify. In fact most of the resources on which we depend, from microwave ovens to VCRs, seem to operate magically, and as long as they work, that's fine with us. We have better things to do than understand the inner workings of every convenience we enjoy. The price we pay, though, is a kind of detachment from the thing, a sense that we are not really in control—that any second it could break down, and we would have no idea of how to fix it. We would have to depend on our ability to locate an expert.

Language, a tool by which the human consciousness is formed and grows, requires its pool of experts as well. People who write should know their tools. I suspect that our world's best writers do, for the most part, know the grammar of their language. They can take their sentences apart and put them back together again in better than original shape. They can make conscious, informed decisions about what steps to take to clarify muddled prose. They know some principles of style. They can name the parts of their device. None of this knowledge inhibits their creativity or dampens their responsiveness to intuition; rather it provides the discipline to support and enrich the art.

But what about the next generation of writers? And those who come after them? As knowledge of those conventions that encourage clarity and exactness deteriorates, does the tool of language become less and less keen? If we can't talk about what makes a particular construction weak because no one knows an active verb from a passive verb, or even the difference between tense and voice, doesn't it follow that our syntax will get mushier and mushier? It's

true that some people seem to have an instinctive command of the language and write well apparently without benefit of instruction in formal grammar. Most of these people read well and often. What are the implications for our civilization when writers cease to understand their medium, and the quality of the body of what passes for literature declines? (Ben Stein in a scathing piece entitled "Pssst—Spengler Was Right" in the November 8, 1989 *Baltimore Sun* claims that even now "there is not one single first-rate novelist in the English language.")

I would not argue that every student who understands grammar will become a first-rate novelist. But I believe that those who care about graceful, lucid prose—and it seems fair to assume that most college students fall into that category—would be more skillful and confident writers with its mastery. If we believe in the efficacy of revision as part of an effort toward precise and stylish expression, then we need a vocabulary through which to talk about our texts. Grammar provides such a vocabulary. And English *majors*, those who will spend their lives writing and perhaps teaching, should not be allowed to graduate without a thorough competency in the nuts and bolts of their language. Such a gap would be unthinkable in a foreign language major. Perhaps, rather than viewing grammar as a humdrum, junior high kind of activity, we ought to offer it as an honors course at the college level to those students who aspire to gain and pass on expertise in the use of language, an expertise that insures one hedge against its abuse.

Gail Lewis Tubbs
Washington College
Chestertown, MD

Directory Announcement

The National Writing Centers Association is compiling a national directory of elementary, secondary school, and college writing centers. To receive a copy of the directory form for your entry (which was included in the February 1991 issue of the *Writing Lab Newsletter*), please send your stamped, self-addressed envelope to:

Pamela B. Farrell, NWCA President
12 Essex Drive
Little Silver, New Jersey 07739

Business Communication Meets in the Writing Center: A Successful Four-Week Course

The purpose of Communication 215, Effective Communication, is for students to learn how to write and speak clearly for business. During the academic year, students in this course frequently attend Widener University's Writing Center for one-on-one instruction in writing, individual orientation to word processing on the IBM personal computer, and interaction with Writing Center instructors—both at the computer and at Writing Center tables—at various stages of the students' writing process. Throughout the academic year, as many as 300 students in the Effective Communication classes spend one or two hours per week at the Center planning documents with peers, writing at the computer, and conferring with writing center instructors. Last year, Comm 215 was scheduled for the summer, when the Writing Center is closed. The students and the instructor would have been without the benefits of the Writing Center if some last minute arrangements had not been made. The solution to the closed Writing Center was to move the class to the Center and open the Center to students for one-on-one instruction both before and after class. Because I am the instructor of the summer course as well as the Director of the Writing Center, both relocating the class and opening the Center several hours each day were easily accomplished.

Recent Research

Before I explain how this change of location for Comm 215 worked out, I will consider some of the literature on computers in writing and collaborative learning. Recent research in composition acknowledges the benefits of computers for student writers and supports collaborative learning in writing centers and in classroom instruction. Numerous articles have been written concerning the effect of computers on the development of writing skills. While there are questions regarding the best use of computers in college-level writing instruction, there is no question that computers have had a substantial impact on written communication in college courses. According to Cynthia Selfe in "Redefining Literacy: The Multi-Layered Grammars of Computers," computer-supported writing

centers "can serve as laboratories in which we inform and update our notion of literacy as it is practiced in computer-supported communication environments" (3). Selfe reports on computer-supported courses which are "paperless," that is, instructors store assignments, handouts, and notes on the computer; students review peers' drafts which are posted on a computer bulletin board; and students hand in assignments on-line (12). She suggests that writing teachers observe student writers as they develop writing strategies in computer-supported environments and exchange information with colleagues about student use of computers for writing assignments.

In a review of computer programs in writing centers, Jeanette Luchte considers software designed for five purposes: prewriting, organizing, drafting, revising, and proofreading and copyediting. She observes that word processing facilitates revision on two levels—surface revisions made by students as they enter handwritten prose and internal revision during review of successive printed drafts (16). Luchte notes that word processing appears to invite students to revisit and review more often.

At the 1989 Conference on College Composition and Communication, Susan Jensen-Wagman and Richard Sammons also evaluated software for writing instruction. They considered programs for prewriting invention heuristics, revision aids, drill and practice for grammar instruction, tutorials, utilities, and an interactive program for collaborative writing. In reviewing the literature on the use of computers in writing instruction, Jensen-Wagman and Sammons found that students had reported that revision on the computer was easy. Jensen-Wagman and Sammons observed the same was true for students in their own classes. They reported that students who used the computer for writing assignments were more likely to make global revisions, not just surface revisions, on their writing than those who did not use computers.

In a 1989 article in the *Writing Center Journal*, Lisa Ede addressed the notion of writing as a social process and considered the

role of writing centers in this light. Ede sees writing centers as a place where collaborative learning takes place (9). She encourages writing center instructors to gather data and to contribute to the ongoing discussion of writing as a social process (11). Like Ede, Anne Johnstone references Marilyn Cooper's ecological model of writing. Building on the model, Johnstone considers how, among writers and readers, "the forms and purposes of texts and the ideas informing them develop interactively" (55). Such development occurs routinely in business communication classes which require group work.

In a business communication class, group projects foster interactive collaborative learning and promote careful consideration of audience and purpose. Much like writing center instructors, students ask questions of each other, reflect on their objectives in writing a document, and temporarily take the role of the recipient of that document. After a group member prints out several copies of a computer draft of the group's document, group members respond to the draft, making notes, penciling in corrections, and questioning both content and format. In group discussions, students exchange ideas, complain, support, and finally revise their document. Sometimes groups run a style analysis program for additional feedback; frequently, the printout from the style analyzer prompts an animated discussion about whether to accept its suggestions for revision. Certainly, the group's collaborative efforts are interactive.

Further, since most of the group assignments are derived from problems and case studies, group members must cull the salient points from the case before they can plan a document. This effort involves critical thinking in determining a course of action. The student writers, like the writers which Johnstone mentions, "use what they know about their readers" (51) when they decide what to say to the intended recipients of their documents. In developing strategies to approach the writing tasks, students in business communication classes discuss their personal analyses with one another and with the classroom instructor, who functions much like a Writing Center instructor—asking questions and facilitating a discussion of options in approaching the writing task. During the four-week summer course, the Widener Writing Center served as an environment for collaborative learning; for

brainstorming, organizing, writing, and revising; and for incorporating the computer in the writing process.

Communications 215 at the Writing Center

Turning to the logistics of moving the business communication class to the Writing Center, little more was involved than rearranging the furniture and setting up a two-stage class format: the class meeting as a whole for lecture, discussion, and student presentation; and groups meeting in separate areas of the Center to work on problems and cases.

Two regular features of Comm 215, computer orientation and group work, had to be handled differently in the short summer session. During the academic year, Comm 215 teachers require students to attend the Writing Center for an individual computer orientation. Those students with prior word processing experience complete a teacher-designed exercise and print it out as evidence of word processing ability. One way to accomplish the computer requirement in the summer session was to bring the entire class to the Center during class time for an orientation. But class time is in short supply in a four-week session, so orientations were scheduled at the Center before class during the first week. Planning for group work was more of a challenge. During the academic year, students in Comm 215 have group meetings in class as well as on their own time. However, most of these summer students had schedule conflicts because of other classes and part-time jobs. To accommodate student schedules, class began at 8:30, a half hour earlier than scheduled, and continued to 11:30, a quarter hour later than scheduled. The extended class hours provided ample time for both the formal class and the group meetings. But there was one more challenge: providing one-on-one Writing Center instruction. To meet that challenge, I served as a Writing Center instructor from 8:00-8:30 and 11:30-12:00 each day. Students came early and stayed late, and it was business as usual at the Center. On most days, the computers were running as early as 7:00 a.m. At noon, when the Center closed, students who still needed time at the computers took their work to the computing center.

All in all, holding the business communication class in the Writing Center positively influenced both process and product. In the

second part of each class, the group meeting portion, students became engaged in sustained group efforts on projects. Since the computers were only a few feet away from groups, it was common practice for groups to move from planning and drafting short reports at a table to entering the draft on the computer and printing out four copies, one for each member. The next step meant a return to the table, where students discussed corrections and revisions. Shortly, one student from each group returned to the computer to correct and revise the documents. The students learned that correction of mechanical errors and revision of text are quickly and easily accomplished on a computer. They sensed they were making progress toward completing an assignment in one morning when they realized it was possible to print out a revision in five or ten minutes. There was constant discussion among group members about how to improve documents, and one person was always willing to stay after class to make one more change to produce a finer, more precise document.

From the standpoint of instruction, the situation was ideal, permitting the teacher to move from group to group to question writers' strategies or respond to student questions. The workshop atmosphere also gave students the chance to work on individual assignments and look for a responsive peer reader. Clearly, the writing process was emphasized in the summer course.

Not surprisingly, the Writing Center environment also kept the writers' attention on the final product. Handbooks, writers' guides, business writing texts, dictionaries, thesauruses, and samples of student business writing, as well as the computers, kept students focussed on completing the project in the appropriate form. The countless samples of memos, letters, resumes, proposals, and reports sparked discussion of format, while the computer allowed students to view their documents in more than one form. Since product is important in business writing, the students' attention to document design as well as content was advantageous.

Finally, during the four-week session when Comm 215 met in the Writing Center, the students were highly productive. Group members wrote and talked about their writing at length and had the support of other groups involved in the same process. For almost

everyone it was an opportunity for intensive and extensive writing. Because the class thrived in the Writing Center environment, this year's summer business communication class will also meet in the Center.

Patricia M. Dyer
Widener University
Chester, PA

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- Selfe, Cynthia. "Redefining Literacy: The Multi-Layered Grammars of Computers." *Critical Perspectives on Computers and Composition Instruction*. Ed. Gail E. Hawisher and Cynthia L. Selfe. New York: Teachers' College Press, 1989. 3-15.

Call for Papers Conference on the Teaching of Grammar

**July 15-16, 1991
Williamsport, PA**

Keynote speaker: Bill McCleary

For topics and other information, contact Ed Vavra, Pennsylvania College of Tech., DIF 112, One College Ave., Williamsport, PA 17701 (717-326-3761, EXT. 7736; FAX: 717-327-4503). Deadline for proposals: April 30, 1991.

Conference of the New England Writing Centers Association

April 13, 1991
Keene, NH

Featured Speaker: Ira Shor

For information, contact Susan Monroe
Nugent, Writing Center, Keene State College,
Keene, NH 03431

3rd Annual Meeting of the North Shore Writing Centers Consortium

April 26, 1991
Deerfield High School
Deerfield, Illinois

*"Writing Centers: Meeting of Mind
and Machines"*

Featured speaker: Gwendolyn Brooks

The conference is primarily for (but not limited
to) directors of writing centers in middle
schools and high schools. Contact: Penny
Frankel, Deerfield High School, 1959 Waukegan
Road, Deerfield, IL 60015 (708-405-8416).

13th Annual Conference of the East Central Writing Centers Association

May 3-4, 1991
Highland Heights, KY

"Reading the Act of Writing"

Keynote speaker: Lil Brannon

Contact Paul Ellis, Writing Center— 230 BEP,
Northern Kentucky University, Highland
Heights, KY 41076.

Calendar for Writing Center Associations (WCAs)

- April 6: Mid-Atlantic Writing Centers
Association, in Philadelphia, PA
Contact: Georgianne McVay,
Writing Center, Philadelphia Col-
lege 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 Pro-
grams, Samford U., Birmingham,
AL 35229
- April 13: New England Writing Centers
Association, in Keene, NH.
Contact: Susan Monroe Nugent,
Writing Center, Keene State Col-
lege, Keene, NH 03431
- April 26: North Shore Writing Centers
Consortium, in Deerfield, IL
Contact: Penny Frankel, Deerfield
High School, 1959 Waukegan
Road, Deerfield, IL 60015
- May 3-4: East Central Writing Centers
Association, in Highland Heights, KY.
Contact: Paul Ellis, Writing Cen-
ter, No. Kentucky U., Highland
Heights, KY 41076
- Oct. 4-5: Midwest Writing Centers
Association, in Overland Park, KS.
Contact: Steve Kucharik, Dept. of
English, Garden City C.C., 801
Campus Drive, Garden City, KS
67846
- Oct. 17-19: Rocky Mountain Writing Center
Association, in Tempe, AZ.
Contact: M. Clare Sweeney, 2625
College Ave. South, Tempe, AZ
85282-2344

7th Annual Young Rhetoricians' Conference

June 20-22, 1991
Monterey, CA

For conference information, call Hans Guth (408-924-4436) or Gabriele Rico (408-924-4448), Dept. of English, San Jose State University, San Jose, CA 95182-0090. For information about transportation and lodging, call Maureen Gerard (408-646-4100).

National Learning Center Conference

June 13-15, 1991
New York, NY

For information about this conference being held at Fordham University, Lincoln Center, in New York City, contact Elaine Caputo-Ferrara, 64 Bridgetown Street, Staten Island, NY 10314 (718-983-8202).

Call for Papers

Council of Writing Program Administrators Annual Workshop/Conference

Workshop: June 10-13, 1991
Conference: June 13-16, 1991
Saratoga Springs, NY

*"Authorities and Responsibilities: Writing
Programs and English Departments"*

Please submit proposals to Louise Z. Smith, Department of English, UMass/Boston, Boston, MA, 02125. Deadline: April 5, 1991.

A Reader Asks...

The Steering Committee of the New England Writing Centers Association is reassessing the Association's purposes. At present our primary activity is presenting the annual conference. We would like to leave more of the planning to the conference chair and to devote the Committee's time to other activities useful to writing centers.

We are interested in learning what sorts of activities other associations are engaged in. In the Fall/Winter issue of *The Writing Center Journal* Diana George and Nancy Grimm note the expanded roles of writing centers. Are these "expanded responsibilities" reflected in the way associations are defining their purposes?

Please write to me or respond here in the *Writing Lab Newsletter*.

Leone Scanlon
Director of the Writing Center
Clark University
950 Main Street
Worcester, MA 01610-1477

A Reader Asks...

Our School has enjoyed receiving the *Writing Lab Newsletter* for several years. It has been an invaluable resource to us for the last few months because we have been planning the opening of our own Writing Center this January. We are currently using some ideas from the "Tutor Selection: Assessing Applicants through Group Interviews" article in the January 1991 issue.

To continue improving our own writing as well as our teaching of writing, some of us are interested in taking courses and attending workshops this summer (The *Writing Lab Newsletter* lists seminars during the school year, which are often difficult for us to attend). Could readers send us a list of recommended courses/workshops/seminars?

Kristine Allstrom
The Hun School of Princeton
Edgerstoune Road, Box 271
Princeton, NJ 08542

Tutors' Column

Last semester, a student came to me with a writing assignment from his government class. "This is what I have to do," he told me. After I had read over the assignment sheet, I asked, "May I see what you have so far?"

Terror washed over his face, and with a trembling voice he whispered, "That's just it. I don't have anything! I can't write. I haven't been in school for over 25 years, and even then I couldn't write! I don't know what to do."

"Don't worry," I began. "You'll be off and running in no time." This small bit of encouragement seemed to calm him, so I continued. I asked him if he knew what he wanted to write about. He said "Yes, I'm going to write about why I think President Reagan is a good president."

"Good, that's a great start," I encouraged, but then I said it. Unknowingly, I unleashed the monster word that caused his forehead to constrict and his eyes to widen to the size of grade A jumbo eggs: "Why don't we start with an outline?" I asked.

"OUTLINE!?" he screeched. "I can't do an outline! I can't even write! I can't do it! I just can't do it!"

Never had I seen such a frantic individual. I decided to disguise the monster-word as an analogy. "Do you have any house plants?" I asked. He seemed puzzled but relieved with the change of subject.

"Not really, but I do have a pretty good garden every year."

"What grows the best?"

"Usually my cucumbers turn out really nice."

"How do you make them turn out so nicely?"

"Well, it takes just the right amount of watering, fertilizer, sunlight, weeding, and most

importantly, good soil."

"So you add all of those ingredients to one little seed, and you get good vegetables?"

"Uh huh."

"Writing really starts the same way."

"How?" he asked in disbelief.

"Let me explain," I pleaded. "In an essay you have a thesis stat—"

"THESIS!" he coughed. "What is a thesis? I don't even know what that is. How am I ever going to do this?" He looked at me with an ulcer-forming expression. I really felt bad having said the first monster word, but now I had done it once again with the T word. "Please let me start over."

"Okay," he said as he nervously played with the eraser on his pencil.

"In an essay you have a main idea that you back up with supporting evidence. You can't just say that you think Ronald Reagan is a good president without giving the reasons you believe this. A cucumber seed also needs supportive material in order for it to grow and become complete. Neither the main idea of an essay nor the seed of the cucumber can stand alone. Do you understand what I'm getting at?"

"Yeah, I think so."

He was starting to calm down. Even his eraser toying had slowed down. I continued, "The seed is the beginning, or the main idea. In other words it is your thesis, and you already have that."

"Yeah," he looked cautiously excited.

"Now, a seed has to be planted in good soil, right?"

"Right."

"Do you know why you think Ronald Reagan is a good president?"

"Yes, I have several reasons."

"Let's think of the soil as the first reason, or supporting point in your essay. The soil gives the seed a good foundation, and it is here that the seed, or idea, begins to take shape. However, a seed cannot live by dirt alone. Without more supportive elements the seed will probably never sprout, but adding a little water should help tremendously. The water is the second supportive point of your essay."

"Oh. Okay."

"Notice that with every addition of supportive material, the seed is strengthened as it grows, and the ultimate goal of raising high quality cucumbers or essays seems only a sentence away."

He looked intrigued.

"You have a sprouting plant now, but you want a mature adult plant that can bring you perfect cucumbers. What do you do?"

"Sunlight!" he exclaimed. "I mean my third reason, right? To make it more clear, right?"

He understood. "Yes! Sunlight will definitely set your essay on more solid ground."

"What about fertilizer?" He was really getting excited.

"That is really up to you. If you feel like your paper needs more support, then add a little, but be careful not to overdo with the fertilizer. If you already have a prize-winning cucumber, why risk adding anything extra?"

"I think I can go ahead and add a little something, but how in the world do I end it?"

"Ending is the easy part. All you need to do is remix your ingredients and tell your audience that this is why you planted the type of seed that you did."

"That's it?"

"Yes."

"Cool."

"See, making an outline isn't so hard."

"What? I told you I can't do an outline," he barked in a defensive tone.

"Just trust me for a minute, OK?"

"OK. Whatever."

"You've really done a basic outline in your head already."

"What?" he scowled.

"You have," I persisted. "Let me show you. May I borrow your pencil?"

"Sure."

I proceeded to draw the basic form of an outline in the terms that we had discussed. As I showed him how to replace the components of good gardening with Roman numerals and letters of the alphabet, he became a changed man. His proud and confident nod boasted of his newly acquired understanding.

"I knew you could do it."

He smiled, looked down at our outline, and smiled again. "I think I can do that," he said. As he continued to survey the outline in his moment of glory, I saw a question forming in his expression.

"Where does the weeding fit in?"

"After you've planted your seed and added water, sunlight, and perhaps some fertilizer, there are bound to be some ugly weeds popping up, trying to damage your crop. You can probably eliminate the most obvious intruders by walking through your garden with a hoe and chopping up all of the weeds that you see. It is really a good idea to have someone else weed with you because what looks like a flower to you may obviously be crab grass to another reader."

"So I can write this and bring it back for you to look over?" he asked as he smiled and started putting on his jacket.

"Yes, come back anytime." The session was over.

Afterwards, I thought about how some

words can trigger incredible amounts of anxiety in some writers. As tutors, we must be aware of this. We must also be prepared to use different methods of explanation when a student hyperventilates after we ask him if he has a good thesis statement. After helping the student in a way that she can understand, we must try to eliminate the original fear of the monster word. We need to explain to the student that she does understand the concept of the term and that this word is only a technical label. If we strive to redefine such terms in a way that the writer can understand, I believe that the tutoring session as a whole can be greatly improved.

Tammy Griffin
Peer Tutor
East Central University
Ada, OK

The Writing Center Story

It's been a wild night in the writing center. The freshman core writing classes have a paper due tomorrow. Students clutching scribbled drafts in varying degrees of completion have trekked through our doorway in a continuous flow all night.

Thirty minutes to closing. It's taking every bit of energy I have to focus on Eric's research paper for philosophy. He wants to know if it fulfills the professor's assigned purpose. My brain is so weary that I'm having trouble simply understanding what the professor's purpose is. I ask Eric how he understands it and what he set out to prove with his paper. Before long, we're in the middle of a great conversation, and it produces benefits for us both. My superficial knowledge of the Polish Solidarity Union has been expanded and his ability to communicate what he knows about the subject has been sharpened. At 8:55 p.m. Eric gathers up his papers, we exchange smiles and thank each other. I feel happy, but I also feel very glad the night's work is over. Almost.

As Eric rounds the corner, he nearly collides with a flustered-looking young woman. She mumbles apologies to him and then apologizes to me for coming so late. I immediately think of my friend Robin who likes to tell me she sees an "S" written on my forehead — for

sucker. But this little person looks like she'd cry if I said, "Sorry, we're closed." Besides, my work with Eric gave me a little boost of energy and, what the heck, how long could it take?

I smile at the little person and say, "Hi, I'm Judith. Do you need some help?"

"Oh, gee, could you, I mean, would you, oh, thanks, I mean, like, I'm really in trouble. Oh, my name's Krissy, hi!"

Krissy is working on an opinion paper, due tomorrow. She's wrestled with it all weekend and is convinced that she just can't write. "I can't even sleep any more because of this stupid paper, I'm really stuck. I know I'm a bad writer...." I read the paper while Krissy fidgets in her chair. Something seems wrong here, and it's not with her writing ability. Important details are missing which would bring the story to life, make it a truly convincing argument for her opinion. The story is about working mothers, and her opinion is against women who continue working after they have children. The paper contains some well-thought-out arguments, intelligently stated. But it doesn't move me. It feels clinical.

"Krissy, why did you chose this topic?" I ask. She begins to answer, "I couldn't think of anything else, and I do feel strongly about mothers who go off and leave poor little kids...." I begin to suspect there's more to this story. Something that has caused her to hold back in her writing. Krissy continues, "Women who want to work shouldn't have children, that's my opinion, period!" The force of this statement makes me sit back in my chair.

Suddenly Krissy becomes very agitated. She blurts out angrily, "I know, because my mother was never around for me; she cared more about the things she could buy than about being a mother!" Tears begin streaming down her cheeks. I can't help myself, I lean over and give her a hug. She needs that more than writing help right now.

Afterwards, Krissy opened up and shared some very personal feelings and experiences. When we finished talking, we worked on her paper. Her block seemed to have disappeared, and she bubbled over with ideas, ideas that brought genuine conviction to her argument. We walked out of the writing center

together, both feeling elated, like we'd really accomplished something that night.

During my drive home, the events of that evening kept replaying in my head. As I often do when my thoughts become complicated, I began to make up an analogy. I decided that, in a way, the writing center is like a story. The main plot of this story is the unfold-

ing of hidden writing abilities. But the story also has a sub-plot, which is the human dramas that are an integral part of this unfolding. Sometimes I can't decide which part of the "story" I enjoy most.

Judith Renaud
Peer Tutor
Gordon College
Wenham, MA

A Midwife's Guide to Writing For Learning Assignments

Our high school writing center attempts to spend much time and effort in working with staff in developing, utilizing, and sharing writing-to-learn activities in all disciplines. We do occasionally work with students who bring in "Assignments From Hell" (samples at the end of this article); however, our experiences have led us to develop and continually modify/improve a "blueprint" to help all teachers develop more effective writing-to-learn activities. Samples of the "Writing/Learning Activity Design Worksheet" for instructor use, the corresponding "Writing Assignment Worksheet," "Writing Assignment List of Keys," the "Reader Evaluation Sheet" for student use, and a brief overview/explanation of each can be obtained by writing to me (Burlington High School, Burlington, Iowa 52601).

Our major premise behind all of these worksheets is the same as our premise behind writing-to-learn; the more one writes/thinks about an experience, the more effective and significant that experience becomes. We have developed the "Writing/Learning Activity Design Worksheet" to aid/encourage teachers in developing writing-to-learn activities by asking them to write about these as they develop them. The student "Writing Assignment Worksheet" and the "Writing Assignment List of Keys" also aid/encourage students to better understand and complete the writing assignment by writing about the assignment as they write the actual assignment. These worksheets are an attempt to complement and reinforce the value of writing as a means of learning while preparing or completing an actual writing assignment.

Many non-language arts/writing instructors are hesitant or fearful of writing-to-learn activities; they believe that they must

teach writing in order to use writing. We have structured the "Writing/Learning Activity Design Worksheet" to emphasize that the content objectives always come first; the writing is the means to help students achieve the content learning. (We also encourage the use of this worksheet in our writing classes; beginning with the "content" of writing instruction we want students to learn has helped many of us develop much more meaningful writing tasks.) We constantly stress to those interested in exploring and using writing as learning to begin with the goal, the content objectives, and then to develop the means, the writing task(s), to help students achieve this goal. The worksheet is relatively self-explanatory, but we encourage instructors to make sure that they have fully thought through and developed the writing task. The worksheet suggests options for the "process" of the assignment from individual to large group writing tasks, to graded or Pass/Fail options, to a variety of pre-writing activities, to the instructor evaluation and modification of the assignment. The form may seem too simple to some, but we have discovered that many instructors never consider these issues in designing writing tasks. Obviously, as instructors work with the worksheet they become more aware of the elements involved in developing effective assignments, but the worksheet can be an effective checklist as instructors prepare writing tasks.

Our experiences with writing-to-learn activities have also taught us to emphasize the importance of providing samples of successfully completed projects and of completing such projects as class activities, especially early in a course. For many students, the use of writing as learning will be a new (and often frightening) experience, and the sharing of samples and completion of group work on such assignments is one of the most effective ways to help students understand such assignments and to

develop the effective skills and affective attitudes needed to complete such tasks.

The "Writing Assignment Worksheet" is the student version of the "Writing/Learning Activity Design Worksheet," and we encourage instructors to have students complete the "Writing Assignment Worksheet" as a large group activity at the beginning of a course and to show the students the relationship between the instructor's "Writing/Learning Activity Design Worksheet" and the student's "Writing Assignment Worksheet." We are convinced that students will often know or will discover the content expected, but they are often confused about the format or writing task in which the content is to be shared. Again, the guided positive practice with the "Writing Assignment Worksheet," especially early in a course, is essential in the success of writing-to-learn activities.

The "Writing Assignment List of Keys" is a one-page version of the "Writing Assignment Work Sheet" and is introduced after students have had practice with the "Writing Assignment Worksheet." The "WALK" sheet (see the May 1989 issue of the *Writing Lab Newsletter*) is an easy "checklist" for writers as they gain confidence and skill in completing the writing as learning tasks.

The "Reader Evaluation Sheet" referred to in the worksheets is a written version of Bill Lyons' "Praise-Question-Polish" response technique. Having students complete a "Reader Evaluation Sheet" is also an excellent way to generate discussion about the content of the writing and the writing itself and is an effective way to provide positive practice in developing response techniques.

Using these worksheets demands a great time commitment; time for the instructor to develop the activity, time to introduce and provide practice with these with students, and time for students to complete these and the actual writing. However, the use of these sheets is literally a case of trading quality for quantity; those who use such sheets do "cover" less material in their classes but they help student "uncover" a much deeper understanding of the material and help students develop more effective thinking and communication skills.

Some sharings of our "Assignments from Hell" (AFHs):

Our experiences have lead us to believe that most "AFHs" are so because the instructor has failed to perform the basic writer's tasks of considering audience and intention in the writing assignment. This is often combined with lack of completed samples, lack of group work in completing samples, and lack of clearly specified criteria for assessment and/or evaluation. For example, many such assignments never specify whether the intention is for the students to merely show that they understand the content or whether the students are to share some kind of personal analysis/synthesis/evaluation of the material. We share the following (with no attempt to protect the inept):

"Write a paper about technology in the future. Do not write about nuclear war."

"Explain the theory of evolution."

"Write an 8-10 page research paper about abortion. Use at least 15 sources. Do not plagiarize."

"Write a paper about how to change a tire if you have a flat tire on a busy expressway."

"Write a report about a sport of your choice. Be sure to check your punctuation and spelling."

"Do research about one of the generals in World War II and write about him."

"Write a thesis-support paper for Friday. Be sure that your paper is neatly handwritten or typed."

"Explain how WWI caused WWII. Use specific examples."

"Write a character sketch of Lennie and criticize him."

James Upton
Burlington High School
Burlington, Iowa

Writing Activities for Tutors

Keeping a journal has become a staple of tutor-training. Since I began teaching a tutor-training course at Idaho State last spring, I have required writing tutors to keep an exploratory journal, recording their own writing histories, their reflections on course readings, and their experiences with tutees in the lab. In fact, I have assembled from two published sources a two-page handout of suggested journal assignments for my writing tutors.¹

No doubt, tutors' journals are an important learning tool in developing their interpersonal skills and conferencing strategies. However, I would like to argue for the pedagogical value of two formal writing activities for tutors: annotated bibliographies and a semester report. Having trained both undergraduates and graduate students as they tutored for credit, I believe these assignments offer learning opportunities that complement the tutoring journal. Writing detailed annotations to scholarly articles requires tutors to assess particular pedagogical techniques or research studies and to communicate the significance of these reports to peers in the lab. Writing their own ten- to fifteen-page reports requires tutors not only to generalize about particular Writing Lab experiences (recorded in their journals), but also to contextualize their experiences within a recognized set of writing lab "issues" and to synthesize some of the research on one of these issues. In effect, these two formal writing activities are effective learning strategies for writing lab tutors.

After two semesters, I have observed that tutors learn through both the processes and the products of such writing activities. In assigning the annotated bibliographies, I review proposed titles to avoid duplication, but leave article choices open—so long as the substance of each article is relevant to writing lab tutorials. (If the relevance is not obvious, I ask the writer to append to her article summary a bracketed comment discussing applications to tutoring.) Since writing centers provide a forum for nearly every issue concerning writing and learning, tutors actually end up surveying a huge range of topics, including individualized instruction, differences in cognitive styles, collaborative learning, writing process theory and research, writing conferences, definitions

of and access to literacy, basic writers, writing across the curriculum, English as a second language, and reading/writing connections.

As we read the packet of articles that I have assembled for the tutor-training course, I encourage the tutors to examine—according to their own interests—previous research cited in the article references. Also, in my own academic reading during the semester, I identify several citations that I ask tutors to consider for their annotated bibliography project. Likewise, as tutors begin background reading for their semester reports, they identify articles significant to their research question; these, too, join the pool of possible works to annotate.

Before tutors begin writing their annotations, I ask them to consider as their audience their current peers and, especially, future tutors in the Writing Lab. I ask them, when they summarize their chosen articles, to keep in mind the problems and questions we have considered in our weekly meetings, and thus to suggest how other tutors might apply the articles' findings, insights, and perspectives to their daily tasks in the Writing Lab. Finally, I ask tutors to write comprehensive annotations, detailing specific strategies. (The average entries have been 140 words.) In the bibliography project, I expect tutors to reflect on their own roles not only as trainees, but as experienced tutors speaking to novices. That is, tutors who have increased awareness of their tutoring experiences through writing in journals are asked now to assume some authority in giving practical advice to the less experienced. In this role of advice-givers, tutors may identify, to some extent, with the discourse community of experienced writing teachers and researchers who wrote the articles.

In a similar way, tutors deliberately strive to join this community as they compose their semester reports, which translate their personal experiences with tutoring into a larger social/professional context and which synthesize some of the previous research on writing labs and related topics. In most cases, the tutors' reports reflect their own learning processes by demonstrating an original perspective on a problem that—while not entirely new—has concerned them personally in the Writing Lab.

The titles of the previous reports suggest not only the learning processes that their writers experienced, but also the potential value of these products as learning tools for future tutors:

- "The Conflict between Teacher and Tutor Conferencing Roles"
- "A Guide for Tutoring Business/Technical Students"
- "The Inception of a Writing Center at a Four-Year College"
- "Northwest Writing Centers: A Regional Review"
- "Positive Growth in Tutoring: Benefits for the Peer Tutor"
- "The Role of Counseling in Teaching"
- "Using the Lab to Train TAs as Composition Teachers"
- "Writing before Writing: The Tutor's Role" (on invention)

To ensure the accessibility of these learning tools, at the end of each semester I copy and "publish" each tutor report in its own folder, which is indexed and alphabetized in the Writing Lab Professional Library—two shelves of books, journals, and other teacher/tutor resource materials. Likewise, at the end of each semester, I edit the annotated bibliographies of all the tutors and publish them as a single document, also shelved in the Writing Lab Library. Then, at the beginning of each semester, I point out these reports and bibliographies to the new tutors as sources of information, as student research and writing they can readily identify with, and as models for their own written work.

As documents representing a range of writing lab scholarship, the reports and bibliographies familiarize new tutors with some of the significant issues and leading scholars in writing research. Since I require that new tutors choose articles that have not already been annotated, they must be somewhat familiar with our in-house record of previous scholarship. Though I don't expect them to master this material, I hope that, by reviewing the annotated bibliographies of previous Writing Lab peers (105 entries so far), the newer tutors will feel themselves part of an on-going scholarly project. This awareness of belonging to a community of learners, tutors, and writers is one of the pedagogical strategies I hope to activate by assigning writing projects.

For tutors—undergraduate, graduate, or professional—now working in writing labs as volunteers or for pay, the writing activities described above may provide ideas for credit-bearing independent study projects or internships, for seminar or conference papers, or for publishable articles of their own. In fact, last fall two of the graduate students that I've worked with did present their Writing Lab semester reports at the meeting of the Inland Northwest Writing Centers Association. In any case, the bibliographies and the semester report provide a tutor with the means to document an educational experience—his own and perhaps that of a student he has worked with. As I suggest to Writing Lab tutors, the report may take the form of a personal narrative, a case study, a survey, a pedagogical application and critique, or a theoretical analysis. Thus, student tutors are not limited by the assignment, except that properly documented references to prior writing research are required.

For writing lab directors, these writing activities suggest the kinds of educational goals that help to provide respected rationales for instituting regular tutor-training courses or credit-bearing internships. These writing projects provide a dual means of professionalizing your tutors and of documenting your tutors' educational experiences in your own tutor training courses or for professors of record in English and Education departments. Admittedly, these projects demand time and effort from tutors and supervisors. Every semester, I read drafts of the annotated bibliographies and the research reports, make extensive comments for revision, and meet in conference with each tutor. Like the graduate student tutors, I also annotate ten articles myself (undergraduates write five). After I copy all the annotated bibliographies to a single computer file, editing for consistent format and style takes several hours. But when the semester is done, when the bibliographies and reports are published and indexed and shelved, the assembled products of the tutors' formal writings are something we are proud of. Finally, in my view, the tutors' learning strategies—as revealed in their journals, in their revisions and in their conferences with me—are enhanced in the process of completing the formal writing projects.

Greg Lyons
Idaho State University
Pocatello, Idaho

1987), Emily Meyer and Louise Smith offer suggestions at the end of each chapter. In *Talking about Writing* (U Michigan Press, 1985), Beverly Clark offers a brief rationale for journals and a list of potential topics (171-75).

Call for Papers

Midwest Writing Centers Association

Oct. 4-5, 1991
Overland Park, KS

"Writing Centers: Making Connections"

Keynote speaker: Diana George

Send two copies of a two-page description and a 2-3 line summary, by May 15, to Steve Kucharik, Dept. of English, Garden City Community College, 801 Campus Drive, Garden City, KS 67846 (316-276-7611, ext. 500)

Call for Proposals

8th Annual Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing

Nov. 1-3, 1991
Burlington, Vermont

"Learning to Trust Diversity"

We invite peer tutors, professional tutors, and faculty to submit 250-word proposals for 75-minute panels and workshops or 20 minute individual presentations. Proposal deadline: Postmarked June 1, 1991. Send proposals to Mary H. Dickson, Dept. of Humanities, Trinity College of Vermont, Burlington, VT 05401 (802-658-0337). For information about the conference, contact Diane Howe, Champlain College, Box 163, Burlington, VT 05401 (802-658-0800).

WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER

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