



# WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER

Vol. IV, No. 4 (December, 1979)

With this month's newsletter you will be receiving a copy of the WRITING LAB DIRECTORY, an impressively long list of writing labs which welcome visitors and writing lab personnel who are available to act as consultants and evaluators. The directory is a compilation of answers to the questionnaire sent out last June to members of the newsletter group, and if such a directory proves useful, it will be updated later. This directory is also the result of an incredible number of hours of work by Sheila Ewing, Margaret Sears, and Judith Ware, work performed with their usual high degree of competence and efficiency!

You should also have recently received a copy of the WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER DIRECTORY, a complete mailing list of the membership of our newsletter group, prepared and sent out by Myrna Goldenberg (Montgomery College) and her dedicated helpers, Denise Maresco, Isabel Rosendorf, and Phuong Le. An updated issue will appear in late February, and additional copies can also be obtained, at a cost of \$2 each, from Myrna Goldenberg.

With the aid of these directories, we are indeed becoming more organized, and because of the increasing size of our group, perhaps we are also becoming more aware of the importance of writing labs as part of complete writing programs. But, despite the growth of our group, let's continue to keep in touch. Please keep sending your articles, suggestions, questions, comments, names of new members, and donations of \$3 (with checks made out to me) to:

Muriel Harris, editor  
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HAVE A HAPPY HOLIDAY SEASON, A RESTFUL  
VACATION, AND A GOOD YEAR AHEAD ! ! !

## ARE MACHINES THE ANSWER?

A disturbing occurrence at CCCC in Minneapolis was the audience reaction to the session on establishing a writing lab. I gave a paper on the importance of the humanistic--as opposed to the machine-oriented--lab, and I argued that one-on-one contact is the most effective and ultimately most efficient form of lab instruction. Another speaker seconded my conclusions from the experience of his own lab, where the machines bought with high hopes a few years back now sit increasingly unused on the shelf.

The final speaker, however, reported proudly on her new machines--eye-scanners, auto-tutorial programs, and other paraphernalia--and suddenly the audience began taking notes. Afterwards, they asked her most of the questions, principally about addresses where they too could obtain these marvelous devices.

From their questions, it appeared that most of the audience were newcomers to the field, people in institutions which suddenly had money to spend on "basic skills," and they were eager to learn about the new technology. The appeal of the machines to these people is evident. The task that faces them seems overwhelming: making good writers out of some very poor ones. How are teachers without special training suddenly supposed to teach what hadn't been learned in a dozen years of schooling? Certainly the prospect of tutoring such students with no props for support but paper and pen is intimidating. What does one say? The machines offer a great comfort; they're supposed to do all the work for you. Plug the students in and technology will turn them into writers. Since machines do such wonderful things these days, surely we can believe their claims about teaching students to write.

The fruit of our experience, however, is

that they don't do a very good job. Human contact in the labs does work, and it is our obligation to propagandize for humanistic labs, to share whatever wisdom we've gained with newcomers to writing labs, and to assure them that, even without training, they have more to offer students than the programs and machines.

Fear isn't, of course, the only reason why writing labs use machines. Some argue for them on principle, and the issue is central to debate about how writing should be taught on all levels. It seems to me that approaches which rely on the machines take a narrow view of the students' needs. They examine the problems of poor writers and they diagnose a lack of knowledge, a need for information--information about punctuation, grammatical forms, principles of organization--and they prescribe a workbook regimen as best suited to providing it. The function of their labs is to isolate the particular needs of each student and to dispense the appropriate programs of exercises. The student, it is hoped, will gain not only in knowledge but in confidence as well, and both the writing and the writer will be improved.

To me, however, the mechanistic writing lab is almost a contradiction in terms. Most of the clients of a college writing lab are students who are taking (or who have already taken) a course in composition. The lab presumably offers something they can't get in their large classes: individual instruction and personal attention to their particular needs. The instruction the machines offer is anything but personal; they may allow the choice of a particular pattern for each individual to follow, but these are patterns nonetheless. They may be useful in dealing with surface problems, but they are less capable of dealing with deeper areas of content.

Even if we apply the most sophisticated form of error analysis to students' writing and devote intensive effort to isolating and overcoming their deficiencies, we may fail if we overlook the greatest need--what retention studies show is the most important aspect of all good teaching--contact with a human being who cares. As psychologist Carl Rogers notes, the most essential qualities for making learning possible are "attitudinal qualities which exist in the personal relationship" between the tutor and the student. These include genuineness, prizing, acceptance, trust, and empathetic understanding.

These are qualities which are essential to the teacher in the classroom as well as in

the writing lab, but their frequent absence from the class makes them all the more needed in the lab. We see evidence of these needs almost daily. Many students visit our writing lab desperate if not (even worse) discouraged into apathy. They come with themes that have received F's for having too many comma splices, or with papers whose margins are filled with red AWK's and FRAG's or with numbers which refer back to sections in their handbooks. Such comments are written not by teachers trying to offer the most helpful possible advice but by "evaluators" who see themselves as disinterested judges or (worse) guardians of standards and screeners-out of the incompetent. Students who have been their victims need desperately to have their own worth affirmed as well as to be taught some real lessons about writing. A writing lab which fails to offer these services fails its students indeed.

Our students need first to know that there are other approaches to writing besides these formalistic, inhumane approaches. We have to show them that writing is a real activity that has real meaning for the writer--that it is something that they would want to do. And they need to know that they can do it--that they are capable of becoming college writers. From my experience I'd say that the students whom we think of as our greatest successes aren't those who return and say, "You really cleared up my semi-colon problem," but those who tell us that through our help they gained confidence that they could make it in college. Not surprisingly, they tell us that, oh yes, their writing improved too.

This response to the writer on human terms isn't some operation that occurs apart from our instruction. What we offer isn't a session of psychiatric counseling that takes place before--or instead of--instruction in writing. The human response comes through our instruction and is the product of an attitude that informs it. Good writing lab tutors are always concerned with the student's writing, but they know that writing is an intensely personal activity, and that concern for writing cannot exist in separation from concern for the writer. What I'm saying is that one of our most valuable services is one that machines aren't programmed to provide.

Richard C. Veit  
University of North Carolina  
at Wilmington



## Mini-courses at Emporia State

In addition to regular tutoring services, the Writing Lab at Emporia State University offers a regular series of mini-courses focused on helping students get through classes that require writing. Each mini-course lasts for one hour and is open to anyone interested in attending. The mini-courses are organized and presented by graduate students from the Department of English. The topics cover a wide range of information and attempt to provide basic material that students can utilize in their college courses. Topics for the spring semester include:

Basic Grammar Review - Punctuation  
 How to Take Effective Notes  
 How to Take an Essay Test  
 Review of Comma Usage  
 How to Approach Reading Assignments  
 How to Write a Critical Book Review  
 Review of Footnoting and Bibliography  
 Organization of the Research Paper

Milton Siegele  
 Emporia State University



### A Proposal for the 1980 CCCC?

Last spring at the CCCC business meeting at Minneapolis the following resolution was passed:

**RESOLVED:** That full-time instructors of composition and/or basic writing courses be regarded in every instance as regular faculty members and shall be accorded the same rights as all other faculty persons including equality of salary and accessibility to tenure status.

When the resolution came before the group, I felt that writing lab directors should also be assured the same kind of protection, and I offered a "friendly amendment" to the effect that "and/or writing lab directors" be inserted after the word "courses."

Two or three persons immediately challenged my proposed amendment because they believe writing labs are sometimes staffed by para-professionals, and thus, in their minds, the amendment would open up unresolvable problems relating to their salary and accessibility to tenure status. I withdrew the amendment and said that I would see if a more acceptable amendment could be worked out for

the 1980 CCCC business meeting.

My concern is that writing lab directors who are professionals, full-time persons with degrees and experience clearly acceptable for the responsibility they carry out, should have the same sort of career protection that the resolution accords to full-time instructors of composition and basic writing courses.

Do others feel as I do? If so, I would be glad to go through the proper channels to offer this thinking in the form of a resolution at the 1980 CCCC business meeting.

Mildred Steele  
 Coordinator of Communication Skills and  
 Director of the Skills Center  
 Central College  
 Pella, Iowa 50219




**COMPOSITION AND ITS TEACHING**, edited by Richard Gebhardt, with Forewords by William F. Irmacher and Richard L. Larson. A publication of the Ohio Council of Teachers of English Language Arts, 1979.

This collection of 21 outstanding articles which appeared in College Composition and Communication from 1974-1979 is being published to pay tribute to Edward P. J. Corbett who is concluding his six year editorship of the journal. The table of contents of this collection reads like a role call of "key-note speakers" in the field of rhetoric and composition: Mina Shaughnessy, Janet Emig, Donald Murray, Maxine Hairston, Lou Kelly, Frank D'Angelo, Lee Odell, etc. And the articles, guided into print under Professor Corbett's skilled editorial hand, are those which quickly became recognized as major contributions to the field. Thus teachers of writing will no doubt appreciate the book as an easily accessible collection of necessary readings in composition; but, more to the point, the Ohio Council of Teachers of English Language Arts has done us all a service in providing a means for us to participate in honoring Edward P. J. Corbett.

Copies of the book, priced at \$4.95 (including postage and handling) or \$4.15 per copy for orders of six or more mailed to one address, can be obtained by writing to:

Richard Gebhardt, Editor  
 English Language Arts Bulletin  
 Findlay College  
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How can writing lab instructors evaluate student writing while reading for meaning, and, similarly, how can they be accountable to administrators while remaining credible to students? Most articles on labs address these related problems by offering ways to streamline evaluation procedures, from diagnosing problems, recording student attendance, charting progress, assessing faculty and peer tutors, to preparing the annual account for the administration. I fear, however, that more may be lost than gained when evaluation, and consequently writing, are reduced to numbers and chart-checking, for such refinements must subtly undermine student confidence in the value of writing and in the competence of the writing instructors: how can people who do not write, because it is too complex and time-consuming, possibly help students to become writers who believe that writing is a way of knowing as well as a meaningful form of exchange between people.

At the University of Wyoming Writing Center we have instituted a "practice what you teach" plan, based on the two-part theory that our students' writing problems result, first, from their lack of conviction that writing is meaningful, to be read for understanding rather than for grading, and, second, from their inability to read their own writing critically, to determine if it might accomplish their intentions with their audience.

Students, we believe, have learned these attitudes well in school, where teachers most often examine writing, rather than read it, and where writing is defined as a finished piece. The emphasis on process in the past ten years is redefining writing, but the techniques separating the various stages, such as free writing which suspends judgment to allow for creativity, are to a degree creating false distinctions which might, despite their clearly positive effects, cause further problems. They obscure the fact that writing is always evaluation, not in the sense of correcting surface features but surely in the sense of choosing according to some, often unconscious, overall intention, purpose, or impulse to mean. When this broader conception of evaluation for meaning becomes part of instruction, faculty and peers become interested readers not objective examiners, a distinction James Moffett and James Britton argue is critical in developing writing abilities. Furthermore, the psycholinguistic research of Frank Smith and Kenneth Goodman has shown the impossibility of reading for meaning

More specifically, students' records become written exchanges between them and faculty about the students as writers. During the first meeting, students talk about themselves as writers while an instructor records verbatim what they say. The students then read what they said, immediately realizing they will be taken seriously and that, although talking is not writing, it can provide a skeleton to flesh out and reshape in writing. At the end of each visit, the instructor describes and evaluates what happened; at the beginning of the next meeting the students read the assessments critically and add, cut, or change. These readings and writings are recursive, self-reflective, and time-consuming--each takes about five minutes--but they are efficient because students are shifting back and forth from writer to reader, engaged in purposeful communication.

Additional evaluations come from teachers' assessments and lab instructors' interpretations, but we rely mainly on students responses to writing. Students explain their assignments to others who ask questions and talk about their similar writing tasks. Most students come in with drafts which they then read aloud to other students who agree, disagree, ask questions, and make suggestions. Because the writers receive various, often conflicting opinions, they realize they have options to decide among; students learn to imagine and create their audiences, rather than second-guess their teachers. We do not train peer tutors because we want students to build on their oral linguistic and rhetorical competence. Students recognize that playing critic is part of writing.

Reading aloud not only creates a context for making broad writing decisions but also makes students self-conscious so that they recognize specific surface problems. About seventy-five percent of our students read correctly, punctuating by pauses and stops, adding omitted endings and words, and realigning agreement errors. They know what "awk" means when they hear themselves stumble over confused syntax, and they indicate somehow, by a lowered voice, an upward glance, or a shifted position, when their writing is repetitive or digressive. Students often ask for help with conventions which they now understand as the means and not ends of writing. We reinforce this learning with exercises when necessary and help students write a three-item checklist of problems to edit for one at a time in final drafts. We help students learn to read what they wrote, rather

than intended, and we encourage them to use their ears as signals to stop and evaluate whether or not they are doing what they want to do with words.

Our semester evaluations to the administration are based on the student-faculty exchanges in the individual folders and on general evaluations from teachers and students. Although the report includes names, numbers, hours, and final grades, we emphasize these are only one way of measuring success in teaching writing. To gain a broader perspective on our program, we sponsor a series of programs, Talking about Writing, for the public. Next semester the graduate course in teaching composition, composed of eight teachers supported by the local district and students in Education and English, will use the Writing Center for their research projects.

We have found that the bridging of evaluation and instruction is both effective and efficient, for when students directly experience the constraints of an audience and actually see the consequences of their writing in people, then writing makes sense.

Tilly Eggers  
University of Wyoming

#### Some Tutoring Guidelines

Perhaps some readers of the WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER are facing or will face the unknowns I faced when I began as a new tutor in a new writing center several years ago. In the course of my experience as a tutor at Illinois State University and since then in my role as a writing center director, I have formulated some guidelines that suggest the kind of atmosphere we strive for in our writing center and the kind of rapport we hope to achieve with the students who come to us and with the faculty who send (or fear to send) them. Diagnosing student needs and determining appropriate instruction is of concern to us as well. Yet we find atmosphere and rapport to be even more important during the early stages in our tutorial relationships.

#### DO'S

1. Always be sure that your client has paper and pencil in his hands.
2. Be supportive with each person you tutor. Find positive remarks to make. When you see improvement, tell the student about it. Urge the student to talk about his writing with his instructors.

3. Your clients will occasionally reach plateaus. When this happens, remind them of what they have accomplished, and help them set their goals more specifically.
4. Keep a record of the work you do with each client (with his information sheet): date of session, observations about writing, work accomplished in session, handouts provided, drills, etc.
5. Books, client folders, etc. should be put away properly after each session.
6. Please be on time for scheduled hours. If you will be delayed or absent for any reason, let the Writing Center Director know immediately.
7. You are expected to work on Writing Center work when you are in the Writing Center. Please do not plan to do homework or pleasure reading.
8. If you have any doubts about how to handle a particular problem, please ask; don't try to wait it out.
9. When you find a good resource example, explanation, list, exercise, etc., please make a note of it in the Resource Book so that other tutors can benefit from knowing about it.
10. If one tutor has too many people to handle, at one time and you aren't busy, find out how you can help.
11. If you do not wish to work with a particular client, let the director know privately so that a conflict can be avoided.
12. Occasionally, someone may try to con you into doing his (her) assignment. When this happens, practice the art of conversation--ask lots of questions about the assignment and have the person make notes about his (her) answers.

#### DO NOT'S

1. Tutors are NEVER, at any time in the Writing Center to make negative comments about instructors or assignments.
2. Do NOT proofread or correct student papers.
3. Do NOT revise papers for students. Help them locate the errors and weak spots in their work, but insist that students make their own corrections.
4. Do NOT evaluate the probable grade for a paper.

As a reader of the newsletter, I would be interested in some exchanges of writing lab programs for which students may earn regular academic credit.



Joan Alexander  
Writing Center  
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A

READER

ASKS...

In the writing workshop at California State University, Chico, we are particularly concerned with standards of written English for international students. Many are assigned to our lab courses, and others take advantage of our campus-wide tutoring service. Because the number of such students is growing, I'm sure others are asking the same question: What level of writing fluency in English should be expected of international students?

Brooks Thorlaksson  
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(Editor's note: If you wish to reply directly to Brooks Thorlaksson, please write to the address given above. If you wish to share your response with other newsletter readers, please address you reply to the editor.)

### Manuscript Call (A Progress Report)

In the May, 1979, issue of the WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER, there was a call for manuscripts for a proposed book of articles on writing labs, to be edited by Muriel Harris. If you have not already contacted me either to send in a manuscript or to inform me of the focus of your intended article, please let me know of your plans soon. In addition, more manuscripts are being solicited. While the response has been bountiful, not all aspects of the structure and operation of labs have yet been covered. In some areas, there are unfortunately more articles than can be used (though final choices have not yet been made), but other aspects of labs have not been adequately discussed. Thus, if you are interested in taking part in this project, please contact me soon.

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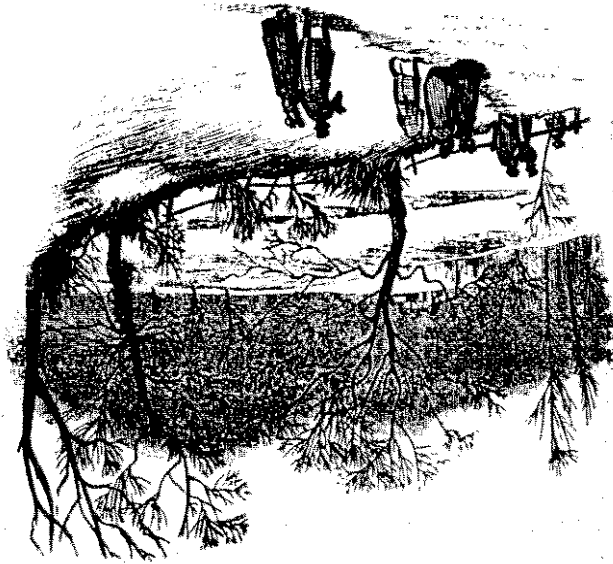
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# SEASONS OF GREETINGS



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