

# W|C|S

A JOURNAL OF WRITING CENTER SCHOLARSHIP

BLAKE | BLEAKNEY, CARPENTER, DVORAK, ROSINSKI,  
AND WHIDDON | BOND | THOMS



## Table of Contents

- 1 **Editor's Note**  
Muriel Harris
- 2 **From STEM to Center: Or What I Learned from Tutoring Engineers**  
Brandy Ball Blake
- 10 **How Course-Embedded Consultants and Faculty Perceive the Benefits of Course-Embedded Writing Consultant Programs**  
Julia Bleakney, Russell Carpenter, Kevin Dvorak, Paula Rosinski, and Scott Whiddon
- 18 **Minding the (Gender) Gap: A Rhetorical Approach to Teaching STEMM Students about Citation Styles**  
Candis E. Bond
- 26 **Tutors' Column: "'I'm a Terrible Writer': Helping Students Who Lack Confidence"**  
Ash Thoms
- 30 **Announcements & Updates**
- 32 **Conference Calendar**

## Editor's Note

Muriel Harris

The articles in this *WLN* issue invite us to engage in re-thinking some perceptions that involves discarding long-held assumptions (Blake), reaffirming and expanding on results of previous research (Bleakney et al.), understanding the underlying but important implications of a standard practice (Bond), and engaging in helping writers overcome a common problem (Thoms).

Brandy Ball Blake offers us a close look at why she put aside her initial marketing approach for engineering students and redirected her outreach efforts. She sought out alternative alliances, marketed her writing center in a different way, and readjusted how she thought about working with engineering students. Her detailed discussion of interacting with these students should be particularly helpful when tutoring students who are working on STEM writing assignments. Next, Julia Bleakney, Russell Carpenter, Kevin Dvorak, Paula Rosinski, and Scott Whiddon discuss their approach to cross-institutional research, the focus of which was to learn what course-embedded tutors and participating faculty see as the benefits of such programs. While the programs varied from institution to institution, the results affirm the benefits to the tutors and offer insights into how future programs can be improved.

While Candis Bond acknowledges that STEMM (the second “M” includes medicine) citation practice is generally perceived as a “nuts-and-bolts” issue, she digs deeper by taking up the issue of gender equity in such citation practices. As Bond explains, there are rhetorical dimensions to the process of selecting sources. In particular, she stresses the problem of under-representation of women in citation lists and offers strategies for tutors to use in conversations with writers about how they select their sources.

In the Tutors’ Column, when Ash Thoms focuses on writers’ lack of self-confidence, she first explores some causes and then offers active listening as an effective method for helping writers see themselves as writers. Active listening, as Thoms explains, requires reflection, engaged interest, and positive feedback. But even more important in helping the student build self confidence is to uncover why such students view themselves as inept writers.



# From STEM to Center: Or What I Learned from Tutoring Engineers

Brandy Ball Blake  
Georgia Institute of Technology



After working in Georgia Tech's (GT's) Communication Center for four years as a tutor and as associate director, I was hired by the H. Milton Stewart School of Industrial and Systems Engineering (ISyE) at Georgia Tech as a "Professional and Technical Communication Coordinator." The Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET) had ruled that ISyE's students lacked strong written communication skills, and the school decided to hire an in-house specialist (as many of the other schools in GT's College of Engineering had) rather than send students to a general technical communication class.

As I settled into the job, I followed the logical steps in establishing myself. I studied models, sat in on classes, and learned as much as I could about the discipline and its jargon. Then, as Kristin Walker suggests, I interviewed professors to get a better idea of their expectations, both of what I would provide and of what the students need (3). Mostly, I worked with students and learned as I proceeded. I discovered that the students had practically no writing assignments between their first-year writing courses and the report sequence required in their Senior Design courses. Because of this, they had few opportunities to write, and I had few opportunities to work with them. Mostly, I helped them with career documents; tutored Senior Design groups as they co-wrote pre-proposals, interim reports, and final reports; and created classes, workshops, and resources tailored to the students' needs.

Now that I have become the Director of GT's Communication Center, I am able to assess how valuable that time was and would be for any writing center director focused on training tutors to better support engineering students. I have narrowed the lessons I learned down to a top three list—The Top Three Mental Readjustments I Made to My Tutoring Praxis after Working in an Engineering School.

## **CONSIDER ALTERNATIVE ALLIANCES.**

As the lone writing specialist in a school of engineers, I felt that I

would have little trouble getting the word out that I was a resource for students. I sent out emails describing ways I could help, put up some flyers, and chatted with students and faculty around the building—all friendly-like—about my services, and while I didn't expect students to knock down my door, I figured they would trickle in. They didn't. I had made several rookie mistakes:

- Students are overwhelmed by their daily volume of email, so mine weren't on their radar.
- Students don't look at flyers (or even digital signage) anymore. It's all noise.
- Faculty didn't think to advertise my services with students. They were concerned mostly with the "hard skills" they taught, not the "soft skills" I could help with.

This last one was a doozy. I went into this thinking that faculty would be my #1 supporters. In "Go to the Writing Center," Emily Nye emphasizes the importance of "[building] alliances" with "faculty, staff and administration to bolster the idea that writing is important to your university" (15). As I struggled to get students into my office, I realized my problematic assumption. ISyE faculty, though enthusiastic about my presence and fully on board with the fact that their students needed help writing, rarely advertised for me because few of them assigned written work, so coming to see me was never going to become part of the school's culture. I needed a different alliance to get students through my door.

I had to determine a new approach. What did they need my help with? I talked to a sample of students and asked them what communication skills they thought they needed and why. I spoke with several ISyE alumni working "in industry" and asked them what communication skills they used regularly. From these conversations, I realized that students who don't spend a lot of time on communication in classes still worry about workforce communication and that those who aren't worried about that are often underprepared for the types of writing they would be expected to do in industry jobs—from client proposals to memos to professional emails. Professors agreed, citing ABET's interest in better preparing students for industry.

I changed my marketing approach, focusing on professional development as well as class projects, which led the Director of Student Services to suggest that I partner with the student professional organization she advised, the Institute of Industrial and Systems Engineers (IISE) student chapter. Since one of the chapter's goals was to help professionalize its members, this was an alliance made in heaven—the audience was already invested. They would help me advertise and invite me to do workshops at

their student meetings. I just needed to determine the workshops that would best suit their needs—from writing professional emails to communicating with clients to creating clear memos.

Nye’s advice to build alliances was golden, but for me, faculty and staff were not the best fit. I just had to keep looking until I found the right alliance. IISE, as a student-run professional organization, gave me the same “street cred” faculty might give a writing specialist in another department or center.

### **FOCUS ON THE WHY NOT THE WHO.**

While working in ISyE, I spent most of my time helping senior design student groups with proposals and reports directed to specific clients, usually local businesses or nonprofits. Students in senior design solved real-world problems faced by those clients, and the reports were intended to explain the problem, provide a justified solution to the problem, and discuss how the solution could be implemented. Report-writing with my students was particularly challenging because they had little experience writing to a non-expert audience. When I first started in ISyE, the reports, directed to the faculty, were full of jargon, stretched between forty-five and sixty pages, were nightmarishly boring to read, and never considered the needs of the client. Students focused almost exclusively on proving technical knowledge to the faculty, but the reports generally ended up being so tedious that not even the faculty really wanted to read them.

Experts agree that engineering students need to learn to explain their ideas to those outside of their field. Reducing jargon, improving clarity, and stressing that engineering writing should be accessible to non-expert audiences is technical writing 101. Alumni agreed, emphasizing that students needed to learn these skills to communicate more effectively with clients. Within two years of getting the ISYE job, I managed to convince the faculty coordinators (and eventually the rest of the faculty) that the reports themselves needed to be client-facing—if students were only taught to explain their work to experts, how would they convince anyone outside of their field to listen to them? I thought that faculty buy-in on this idea would make all the difference. We made the change, and students . . . continued writing exactly the same way.

Even with the faculty on board, convincing the students that they needed to explain their ideas to a general audience was exceptionally difficult because the *students*, not the faculty, resisted it even when told to do otherwise. Students felt comfortable explaining their projects to experts; they believed they could focus on the details without going into the reasoning behind their project—without explaining *why* they had chosen *this* system to focus on, *this*

solution to the problems, *this* deliverable. Experts would just *get it*, right? Experts would see that these choices were the obvious (and therefore the only reasonable) path forward, *right*?

There were several ways to proceed. I started with the obvious: If your client isn't an Industrial Engineer, then would they understand why you picked this system, this solution, this deliverable, etc.? If I got a "No" here, then I could proceed, discussing audience and helping the students understand that, if the client was going to invest thousands of dollars into the solution the students were creating, they needed to understand *why* it was the "best" solution. Students also tried to dismiss the "general audience" idea outright by claiming, "We're really writing to the faculty graders, and they get it." The faculty might *get it*, but often they want to see the group's thought process. Otherwise, how do they know students are learning? The faculty would grumble amongst themselves that "students don't think about what they *should* do. They just make optimization models and simulations"—which was true. Students often chose the problems and solutions that corresponded with the processes they'd focused on in classes rather than the problems and solutions that would best help their clients.

Once students understood that the faculty wanted to understand their justification, they were more willing to explain *why* they made their choices. Luckily, one ISyE professor provided me with a good angle to take with students: *motivation*. Were the students trying to solve the problem in the cheapest way? In the quickest way? In the most sustainable way? In the way that is easiest to implement? Once they could articulate that, then they could explain how the decisions they made (which problem to solve, what solution they chose, what data to analyze, what deliverables to produce) corresponded to that motivation.

### **SHIFT THE NARRATIVE.**

The conversation I dreaded having with senior design groups always came after they received feedback from the faculty on their midterm reports. Students would make an appointment with me and grumble: "He said we use 'we' too much." There it was. My ISyE students were consistently confused about whether to use passive voice (like other engineers do in lab reports) or active voice (which they've been told is better for client reports), so when the professor said they used "we" too much, they freaked out, convinced that they were going to have to completely rewrite the report without any self-references.

Eventually, after meeting with the faculty graders and coordinators, I discovered the whole thing was actually a misunderstanding. The faculty didn't mind that the team was referring to itself—just that it

was doing so unnecessarily . . . and way too much. “First, we looked at this data. Then we ran this data through this methodology. Then we did this math. Then we did this other math. Then we compared the first math to the second math, and we realized that we needed to do a *third math*.” And on and on. Students and faculty focused on the word “we,” but the faculty were mainly frustrated that students were going into too much detail about the processes used to analyze their data and create their deliverables. The clients wouldn’t care about the bulk of it, generally being more interested in results than in processes. The faculty, on the other hand, were reading processes that were overly obvious to them and getting annoyed about it.

The students’ confusion was inevitable. Engineering classes and study sessions spend most of their time on principles and processes, so logically students believe they need to provide the same information in their writing. Walker explains: “Using certain discourse features gives novice student writers entrance into their discipline’s discourse community” (2). Undergraduate Armand St. Pierre describes this as a common feature of students’ “engineering identity”: students want to show “that every decision is the result of careful and rational deliberation on expressible and quantifiable ideas” (63). The faculty always emphasized learning the hard skills, so in the report, students felt like they had to prove they had learned those skills by going into excessive detail. When this happened, faculty tended to complain that the reports sounded wordy – full of “fluff,” they told me. Instead of welcoming them to the discourse community, faculty just assumed students were trying to prove that they were accomplishing *something* but didn’t understand which details were important and so just talked about all of them.

I decided to try shifting the students’ narrative focus. Faculty used the word *narrative* pejoratively to describe the students’ unnecessary fixation on process; I suggested they focus the narrative elsewhere. “Stop talking about what you did,” I’d tell them, “and look instead at the story your data is telling. How can you best visualize that data? How can you use it as a call to action?” Robert Weissbach and Ruth Pflueger indicate that the presentation and analysis of the data are the key to persuading an audience (211). The students should focus on securing solid results, visualizing them, and explaining the visuals so that audiences understand their significance. This helps the client see and more easily grasp complex data analysis while cutting down on process description and wordiness.

“Show. Don’t tell.” That often helps students better understand the importance of visualization and cutting down on wordiness. But if students have a process problem, you might want to explain: *It’s*



*not your story; it's your data's story.*

## **RE-ADJUST YOUR THINKING.**

Are these the only mental readjustments I had to make when I started working with engineers? Well, no, . . . it's just my top three list. Should all writing center directors take a hiatus to work in a STEM school? Of course not. But what I learned from my "hiatus" was that, despite the general misconception that traditional writing centers and their staff aren't ideal tutors for engineering students, I was actually equipped with every tool I needed to be just that. I just needed to think about my usual approaches in a different way.

With that in mind, here are some practical solutions for writing center directors and tutors working with engineering students.

1) Determine how your services can help students professionally and advertise that rather than focusing solely on classes. If you want to send out email advertisements, get help from someone in the department that students are more likely to heed. For example, I asked either the school's Director of Student Services or Senior Design Coordinator—names that students respected or feared and therefore were at least mildly willing to acknowledge—to email important documents for me. In addition, talk to career representatives, students doing internships, and alumni. Find out what services they think students need, and get examples (from exemplary stories to actual documents) that you can use in workshops.

2) Try to get students to discuss the motivation for their project and then why the group has chosen their project path (meaning why *that* problem, why *those* deliverables, why *this* methodology?). If their whys don't correspond well to their motivation, then students need to refocus on their objectives. If students are farther along in the process, tutors can change the focus to "Why is this the best path forward?"—for the group and for the client. In this scenario, the tutor's goal would be to challenge the students to define "best." Doing so should lead to conversations about justifying different aspects of the problem and should help students articulate their reasoning. If students don't understand why they need to explain/justify their choices, then tutors can ask the following:

- a. How would your audience benefit from understanding why you made the choices that you did?

- b. Why might such an explanation be helpful to both the client and the faculty?
- 3) Familiarize tutors with techniques for visualizing data. I would suggest books like *Storytelling with Data: A Data Visualization Guide for Business Professionals* by Cole Nussbaumer Knaflic and *Good Charts: The HBR Guide to Making Smarter, More Persuasive Data Visualizations* by Scott Brinatto.
- 4) Help tutors understand how narrative structure can apply both positively and negatively to [engineering/lab/technical/client/etc.] reports. Tutors should be prepared to question students about
- a. why they focus so much on process (Does your audience need to know every detail of what you did? Is that for the audience or for your professor? What does your audience need to know or see?)
  - b. how they could create visualizations (graphs, charts, illustrations, etc.) so that the audience can better understand.

Even if we're not engineers, our writing centers are still one of the best resources for students seeking help to improve their communication skills. Reading the literature on engineering communication will provide valuable insight, as will interviewing engineering students and faculty, looking at models, and better understanding technical communication and engineering identity. But in learning all that, never forget that one of the biggest issues faced by communicators, administrators, and teachers is getting stuck in our own echo chamber. So getting the perspectives of students, faculty, alumni, and workers in other fields helps to better understand how to prepare your tutors. More importantly, remember that you are already equipped with all the right tools—you just might need a little mental readjustment from time to time.



## WORKS CITED

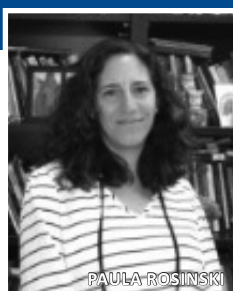
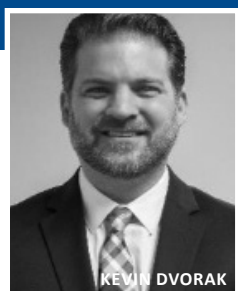
- Brinatto, Scott. *Good Charts: The HBR Guide to Making Smarter, More Persuasive Data Visualizations*. Harvard Business Review P, 2016.
- Knaflic, Cole Nussbaumer. *Storytelling with Data: A Data Visualization Guide for Business Professionals*. Wiley, 2015.
- Nye, Emily F. "Go to the Writing Center": The Writing Center's Growing Authority in a Science and Engineering University." *The Writing Lab Newsletter*, vol. 27, no. 4, 2002, pp. 14-15, [wlnjournal.org/archives/v27/27.4.pdf](http://wlnjournal.org/archives/v27/27.4.pdf).
- St. Pierre, Armand. "Embracing the Other Culture: Bridging the Gap Between the Writing Center and Engineering Studies." *Young Scholars in Writing*, vol. 14, 2017, pp. 56-66, [arc.lib.montana.edu/ojs/index.php/Young-Scholars-In-](http://arc.lib.montana.edu/ojs/index.php/Young-Scholars-In-)

Writing/article/view/1324.

Walker, Kristin. "Disciplinary Writing, Disciplinary Environments." *The Writing Lab Newsletter*, vol. 23, no. 4, Dec. 1998, pp. 1-5, [wlnjournal.org/archives/v23/23.4.pdf](http://wlnjournal.org/archives/v23/23.4.pdf).

Weissbach, Robert S. and Ruth C. Pflueger. "Collaborating with Writing Centers on Interdisciplinary Peer Tutor Training to Improve Writing Support for Engineering Students." *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, vol. 61, no. 2, 2018, pp. 206-220. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1109/TPC.2017.2778949. Accessed 12 March 2019.

# How Course-Embedded Consultants and Faculty Perceive the Benefits of Course-Embedded Writing Consultant Programs



Julia Bleakney  
Elon University

Russell Carpenter  
Eastern Kentucky University

Kevin Dvorak  
Nova Southeastern University

Paula Rosinski  
Elon University

Scott Whiddon  
Transylvania University

## INTRODUCTION

Course-embedded peer-to-peer writing support programs, also referred to as “writing fellows” programs, are often discussed in terms of student mentoring, writing growth, and advocacy. For example, Jim Henry et al. examine

course-embedded mentoring in first-year composition (FYC) courses; Kevin Dvorak et al. study ways embedded tutoring helps students achieve FYC course learning outcomes; and Dara Rossman Regaignon and Pam Bromley find that “working with the writing fellows multiple times over the course of the semester results in a positive and measurable difference in students’ writing” (48). Bradley Hughes and Emily Hall see course-embedded programs as a form of student advocacy, as well. Despite these and other studies, less attention has been paid to how course-embedded consultants (CECs) and faculty perceive the benefits of such programming to students and to themselves as major stakeholders. Furthermore, most studies of CEC work have been limited in terms of scope to individual classes, programs, or institutions.

Our multi-institutional, replicable, and survey-based study



emerged from a desire to get an in-depth understanding of faculty and consultant perspectives on the value of CECs and to highlight the value of cross-institutional research. In their responses to a survey administered across four institutions, CECs and faculty alike discussed how they thought students benefited from their programs. In addition, CECs shared how participating in their programs positively impacted their own learning and writing, and faculty offered their perspectives on programmatic aspects, such as arranging the logistics of student/CEC collaborations and funding struggles.

The programs involved in this study are located at diverse institutions with varying academic goals and different student and faculty populations; each program was designed with its own institution's student populations, goals, and histories in mind. Despite these differing contexts, study results show that these programs share three common features:

1. students are more engaged in the writing process and become more effective writers when they work with CECs;
2. CECs develop a greater self-awareness as writers based on their work with students; and
3. faculty better understand the importance of providing institutional and financial support to CEC programs so they can thrive.

Our study bolsters ongoing arguments about the importance of writing center work and connections to classroom pedagogies. What we found most interesting was how each of our institutions used CEC programming in light of localized concerns and student needs, suggesting that CEC programs are most effective when they are responsive to institutional contexts. Thus, we argue that recognizing localized institutional contexts and tailoring the program based on the departments that CEC faculty teach in, on their prior experience with writing pedagogy, on the majors that CECs are recruited from, and on whether the CEC program supports FYC or upper-level disciplinary writing, are crucial when generating best practices that apply across contexts.

## **METHODS**

The four participating writing centers are located at different types of universities in the southeastern United States; each has its own name for its CECs.

- Institution One is a mid-sized regional comprehensive university that had twenty-one peer undergraduate "Course-Embedded Consultants" connected to twenty-one FYC classes, all of which have a reading-heavy focus.

- Institution Two is a mid-sized liberal arts university that had six peer undergraduate “Disciplinary Writing Consultants” embedded in five undergraduate classes across the curriculum.
- Institution Three is a large private, research, doctoral granting university that had thirty-five peer graduate and undergraduate “Writing Fellows” embedded into sixty-eight FYC courses.
- Institution Four is a small, historic/traditional liberal arts university that had three peer undergraduate “Course-Embedded Consultants” in three first-year seminar courses.

The CECs at all four locations were a mix of novice and veteran writing tutors who were trained to meet the specific needs of the students in the courses to which they were connected. The authors administer the CEC programs at each of the four institutions.

We administered two short, open-ended surveys to faculty and CECs at each institution at the middle and end of the Fall 2017 semester. The mid-semester survey was intended to gauge general satisfaction with the level of interaction between the CECs and students; the end survey, which we focus on in this article, asked CECs and faculty for their perspectives on how the programs impacted their students’ learning about writing in general and writing processes in particular. Surveys were collected by Institution Two using Qualtrics after IRB approval was secured. With a total of ninety-seven courses involved in this program, the response rate to the end survey for faculty was  $n=22$  (23%) and for CECs was  $n=26$  (27%). The responses from each institution were as follows: Institution One: 4 faculty, 4 CECs; Institution Two: 5 faculty, 3 CECs; Institution Three: 9 faculty, 16 CECs; and Institution Four: 3 faculty, 3 CECs. Although the number of participants from each institution varies, we are most interested in patterns across the responses, given that all programs used CECs to support selected classes.

### **CODING**

We divided into two coding teams, with two researchers in each team; we used an iterative emergent thematic coding process, which allowed us to review open-ended survey responses to identify themes and develop initial codes. After each team member reviewed the data independently, teams discussed their codes and made decisions to merge some for synthesis and clarification. Each reviewer then read and coded their data a second time. This process allowed us to develop consistency across the reviews. Merging codes after the first review led to a high level of agreement on the second review of our individual coding. We identified patterns and categories in the responses, as well as in individual comments

from faculty and CECs, to better understand the value of CEC programming across institutions from faculty and CEC perspectives.

## **RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS**

### **CEC PERSPECTIVES — BENEFITS TO SELVES**

In response to the question “In what ways, if any, do you think this program helped you become a more effective writer?”, CECs affirmed benefits documented in previous research. For instance, Bradley Hughes et al. suggest that “every writing center director has seen that student tutors learn as much about writing as do the students they tutor, if not more” (13). Like the alumni tutors who participated in Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research Project (PWTARP), the CECs in our study described becoming more self-aware of their writing style, improving communication skills, learning new writing or research techniques, and improving their critical thinking. The most common benefit, described by fourteen respondents across institutions (54%), is how collaborating and talking with other writers led to improvement in their own writing.

For example, some CECs highlighted how conversation was at the heart of a consultation: “I feel that I have become a more effective writer because of the conversations that happen during a session. During those conversations [...], I’m able to also come up with ideas for my writing as well.” Other CECs focused directly on how working with other writers helped them evaluate and improve their own writing: “In working with the students, I was constantly reevaluating my own writing and knowledge of the writing process.”; “Looking at other students’ styles of writing helps to diversify my understanding of the different ways in which students write.” One CEC highlighted how consultations offer the opportunity for reflection: “it was a reflective process to think back on how my own voice has developed, even during this semester, by working with other writers so consistently.” A final example speaks directly to the idea of collaborative learning: “As the student learns and asks questions that I have to research answers for, we’re both learning about or how to do that one thing.” While the benefits CECs described may also be gained from regular consulting work, what makes them distinct to the CEC experience is the opportunity to work consistently with the same writers and to self-monitor their own development as they repeat advice and review papers with similar content throughout the semester.

The CECs’ responses show that collaborative learning benefits both CECs and student writers because both participate in the development of valuable skills. One of PWTARP’s goals was to “propos[e] a more comprehensive view of the value and influence of collaborative learning in writing centers, one that includes the

impressive development of peer tutors themselves” (16-17). Thus, this study supports PWTARP’s findings through CEC programs. This type of learning is especially powerful and distinct from standard writing center sessions because the CECs are closely mentored by professors concerning assignment needs. These strong working relationships between teachers and students are an excellent selling point for the value of CEC initiatives, promoting students as partners (Cook-Sather, et al.).

### **CEC PERSPECTIVES — BENEFITS TO STUDENTS**

To understand how CECs perceived the benefits to students, we asked, “In what ways, if any, do you think this program helped students become more effective writers?” Twenty-six CECs provided responses to this question, which we coded into categories such as “encourage help-seeking,” “build confidence,” and “encourage collaboration with peers.” The most common response was coded as “help students engage more deeply in the writing process,” which 20 CECs (77%) mentioned. For example, one CEC thought her experiences working with basic writers helped them learn a writing process: “Through this program, I’ve been able to teach them the writing process and show that by learning the steps and tools writers use, they too can become writers.” A second CEC reinforces this idea:

[T]his program has helped students learn how to revise their paper aside from making the small corrections someone could make within the margins of a draft. [It] teaches students that writing is a recursive process, and that it is okay for everyone to have their own process that works best for them.

These findings suggest the CECs believe the work they are doing with students reinforces a long-standing goal for writing centers: providing students with interactions and experiences that help them identify, develop, and hone their own writing processes.

### **FACULTY PERSPECTIVES — CECS ADD VALUE AND HELP STUDENTS BECOME MORE EFFECTIVE WRITERS**

The twenty-three faculty who responded to the question, “In what ways, if any, do you think this program helped your students become more effective writers?,” made clear they value CECs for the same research-backed reasons we value writing center consultants (Henry et al.; Dvorak et al.; Regaignon and Bromley). Faculty explained that CECs provide individualized feedback and guidance as dialogic partners to their students. One faculty member wrote, “[Students] have support and direction in our class—and I think they feel like the embedded consultant and their instructor really care about their progress.” A second faculty member noted, “Students are engaged in a dialogue about their writing that they wouldn’t



necessarily get if writing alone.” Faculty also said students received writing support on organizational issues such as planning and coherence. We see from these responses that faculty are interested in integrating collaborative learning that is characteristic of writing center pedagogy. We also note that building and implementing CEC programs can enhance the culture of writing on our campuses. Faculty recognize that CECs provide students with individualized, dialogic feedback from a more experienced peer who is concerned with their writing development.

### **FACULTY PERSPECTIVES — MAKE THE VALUE OF CECS EXPLICIT**

Faculty also wrote comments on the need to integrate the CEC into the class in more meaningful ways and to make the program’s value more obvious to students. Eight faculty (35%), responding to a question about elements of the program that might be unhelpful, noted logistical limitations or hurdles to making the CECS helpful; four offered comments related to resistance from students, such as “[s]ome students didn’t see need” or “should have made writing worth more than 5%” and “saw it as a hassle” or a “hurdle”; two commented on the need for funding. Two faculty members suggested the CEC “Gave wrong or bad advice,” which can also be a logistical hurdle as it highlights the need for close communication and mentoring between the faculty member and their CEC. The two comments about students undervaluing the program and lack of funds, however, point to larger administrative issues: the need for faculty development on integrating CECS effectively so fewer students view the interaction as “busy work,” and the need to adequately fund the program both as a fair labor practice and as a way to encourage active student participation.

Importantly, faculty development varies among institutions in this study; although it is required across our institutions, the structures differ. For example, three programs provide participating faculty with stipends to support their advanced preparation and participation in workshops, while the fourth provides faculty development during their annual, required pre-fall semester meeting.

### **FACULTY PERSPECTIVES — ATTEND TO CONTEXT AND MAINTAIN FLEXIBILITY**

Our data show that faculty needs and attitudes toward CEC programs are context-specific, and logistics must be clearly defined for constituents, or frustrations may emerge. When asked, “Do you have any other suggestions for improvement to this program?” seventeen faculty gave responses we coded into fourteen different categories, indicating that faculty experiences with CECS are highly context-specific (four faculty said “no changes” and thirteen

faculty each gave a distinct response). The range of different responses highlights how CEC programs are embedded in particular institutional, social, and cultural contexts, and therefore the need for flexibility in design and implementation is crucial.

However, despite these differing contexts, faculty responses indicate that across institutions there is a very real (although unique) need to be specific with logistics, as the following comments highlight: “Make meetings b/w students and fellow/CEC required,” “More examples of how to include CECs,” “Same time requirements for all consultants,” and “Better pay for CE[C].” We hear in these responses faculty frustration over struggles to integrate the CECs and program requirements. Practical implications for designing and implementing successful CEC programs therefore include offering logistical guidelines to participants; defining time or frequency requirements for consultant/student and consultant/faculty interaction; providing institutional- and course-appropriate examples for integrating CECs into the course; and financially supporting these programs, faculty, and CECs.

### **FACULTY PERSPECTIVE — BELIEF IN THE CEC MISSION**

Faculty overwhelmingly believe in the mission of the CEC programs and would like to participate again, although they’d like more time to dedicate to participation as well as to receive more student feedback. Of twenty-two faculty who responded to the question, “Would you like to participate in this program again?” seventeen responded “Yes,” two responded “No,” and three responded “Maybe.” Open-ended responses were clustered around three issues: investment of time committed to students and their CEC; their students’ feedback on the program; and interest in participating again because they believed in the CEC mission. These issues reflect the complex nature—in terms of both impact and labor—of course-embedded, writing center-based programming.

### **CONCLUSION**

Our multi-institutional research highlights several benefits of CEC programs that apply across differing institutional types. These benefits suggest CEC programs are worth pursuing and cultivating, although it’s also important to note that CEC work is challenging and time-intensive. We hope such labor can be supported institutionally, via stipends or professional development resources, as a way to incentivize participation and involve more faculty with CEC programming. As a whole, our study suggests CEC programs are most effective when they are in tune with and responsive to institutional contexts; flexible in response to student, CEC, and faculty needs; and careful to minimize confusion that can occur when building any new program by providing all participants

with explicit guidelines and logistical frameworks. To ensure the program is effective, we recommend sharing with faculty and CECs, in writing and before the class starts, the following:

- a description of the program, to be included in syllabi;
- a list of FAQs unique to the institutional context (e.g., how will the CECs be compensated/at what rate?);
- a list of program protocols (e.g., introduce students to their CEC early in the term, don't ask your CECs to grade writing, etc.);
- examples of how to integrate CECs into classrooms;
- logistical information such as how to arrange appointments with CECs and how CECs should record their work hours;
- a timeline of relevant dates, such as meetings between the directors, faculty, and CECs.

We found that these recommendations contributed to strengthening all of our CEC programs, even though each of them emerged out of distinct institutional and cultural contexts. Similarly, we found that each of our CEC programs, with their attention to building supportive, collaborative environments for the teaching and learning of writing, contributed to enhanced cultures conducive to improved student learning.



## WORKS CITED

- Cook-Sather, Alison, et al. *Engaging Students as Partners in Learning and Teaching: A Guide for Faculty*. Jossey-Bass, 2014.
- Dvorak, Kevin, et al. "Getting the Writing Center into FYC Classrooms." *Academic Exchange Quarterly*, Winter 2012, vol. 16, no. 4, 2012, [rapidintellect.com/AEQweb/5243NEW.pdf](http://rapidintellect.com/AEQweb/5243NEW.pdf), Accessed 9 Dec. 2018.
- Henry, Jim, et al. "Course-Embedded Mentoring for First-Year Students: Melding Academic Subject Support with Role Modeling, Psycho-Social Support, and Goal Setting." *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2011, doi:10.20429/ijstol.2011.050216. Accessed 7 Sept. 2017.
- Hughes, Bradley, et al. "What They Take with Them: Findings from the Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research Project." *The Writing Center Journal*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2010, pp. 12-46.
- Hughes, Bradley, and Emily B. Hall. "Rewriting Across the Curriculum: Writing Fellows as Agents of Change in WAC" *Across the Disciplines: A Journal of Language, Learning, and Academic Writing*, vol. 5, 2008, [www.wac.colostate.edu/atd/calls/call-fellows/](http://www.wac.colostate.edu/atd/calls/call-fellows/). Accessed 7 Sept. 2017.
- Regaignon, Dara Rossman, and Pam Bromley. "What Difference Do Writing Fellows Programs Make?" *The WAC Journal*, vol. 22, 2011, pp. 41-63.

# Minding the (Gender) Gap: A Rhetorical Approach to Teaching STEMM Students about Citation Styles

Candis E. Bond  
Augusta University

As a style, scientific writing prioritizes objectivity, concision, and precision. Consequently, scientific writing can appear innocuous, leading students and researchers to overlook practices that might contribute to gender-based biases and disparities,<sup>1</sup> particularly practices related to source selection and documentation. This is concerning when one considers the extent of underrepresentation of women and minorities in Science, Technology, Engineering, Math, and Medicine (STEMM)<sup>2</sup>—the fields most likely to require mastery of scientific style in order to succeed in the discipline. According to the National Science Foundation’s 2018 report *Women, Minorities, and Persons with Disabilities in Science and Engineering*, despite women achieving parity with men in degrees earned in many STEMM fields, women and minorities are still underemployed and underrepresented.

Research on writing centers and STEMM instruction has tended to focus on general ways to support science writers,<sup>3</sup> the debate about whether to train tutors as generalists or specialists, and WAC and WID collaborations and programming. While it is essential to have this foundational knowledge when working with STEMM writers, it is also important to consider social and rhetorical aspects of scientific style, including the ways its seeming transparency can hide practices that contribute to gender disparities in STEMM disciplines. Teaching STEMM writers about the rhetorical dimensions of source selection and citing may not feel groundbreaking, but at the most basic level, it can be a starting point for facilitating important discussions about gender equity and representation in the sciences. The more tedious work of documenting sources in the sciences—the nuts and bolts of citation practice, such as where to place initials and dates, or which words to capitalize—is often classified as a lower-order concern by writers, instructors, and writing centers alike, or at least as something reserved for the final editing stage of the writing process. As many rhetoricians have pointed out, however, this tedious work has a rhetorical function, offering writers a point



of entry into an established discourse community with its own rules, values, and conventions.<sup>4</sup> In this essay, I urge writing centers to take a rhetorical approach to teaching both source selection and documentation style as a way to address gender disparities in STEMM. I begin by linking documentation systems to gendered social norms and conclude by offering practical strategies for modifying consulting training and practice.

## **A RHETORICAL APPROACH: DOCUMENTATION STYLES AND GENDER BIAS**

In one of the earliest essays linking documentation practices to social contexts, Robert Connors explains that “the seemingly ‘transparent’ structures used in formal citation systems have always been . . . products and reflections of social and rhetorical realities” (7). It is precisely the communal aspect of documentation styles that links the nuts and bolts of citing with social norms, and, as a result, makes it an area worthy of interrogation. Since sentence-level conventions so often serve as windows into larger social practices within a field, teaching writers to be aware of these conventions, how to deconstruct them, and perhaps, someday, how to revise or resist them, can be empowering. When students understand source selection and documentation as value-laden, they are positioned to better understand how these practices can contribute to social inequities within STEMM disciplines, especially those related to gender.

By raising awareness of implicit biases and potential pitfalls in source selection and documentation during writing consultations and workshops, STEMM writers can gain tools for becoming equitable contributors to their disciplines in the future. This is imperative, since gendered publishing and citation practices are reflective of inequitable social norms and have been found to play a major role in women’s underrepresentation and lack of career advancement. For example, a 2018 study of gender disparities in STEMM authorship found that 87 out of 115 STEMM disciplines examined had significantly less than 45% female authorship, even though all of the examined fields were at or close to achieving gender parity in terms of degrees conferred and employment (Holman et al.). Another study found that, between 1991 and 2011, men were 70% more likely to self-cite than women in STEMM publications (King et al.). While many factors contribute to gendered citation practices, several studies remark that gender socialization—particularly the idea that women are not as likely to self-promote their scholarship and are less likely to be promoted to senior levels that lead to prestigious author positions—plays a critical role (Holman et al.; King et al.; Wang and Degol). Significantly, since publications are

one of the main ways disciplines measure academic productivity and prestige, gender gaps can have a lasting negative impact on women's careers in STEM, limiting their ability to receive promotions and credit for valuable research (Holman et al.).

Although the writers who use the writing center as undergraduates or graduate students may not be positioned to have an immediate impact on gender disparities in their disciplines, they can gain awareness of the gendered social norms governing publishing and citation practices in their fields, thereby taking a step toward becoming conscientious writers and critics in their respective fields as their careers progress. Many students, faculty, and disciplinary leaders might object to this kind of instruction, arguing that it detracts from objective source selection. While this is a valid concern, it may be a red herring, as students can be taught to select and cite sources objectively while also being mindful of gender biases and the need for equity within their disciplines. In a study of gender inequities in reporting, journalist Adrienne LaFrance asks an important question: "Is it your job to merely reflect what's out there, or do you have other reasons to write in a more representative fashion?" She answers her question by arguing that "we need to work harder to highlight a variety of voices, not just to improve gender diversity, but to make our stories better." Although LaFrance focuses on journalism, her questions are poignant in STEM fields, where gender disparities are so prevalent. Not every consultation will allow for a focus on rhetorical approaches to source selection and documentation, and not every student or faculty member will be open to these conversations, but writing centers are positioned to begin the dialogue and equip writers with tools for equitable source documentation if and when they are ready to use them.

### **CONCRETE STRATEGIES: RHETORICAL APPROACHES TO SOURCE SELECTION**

To have a positive impact on these gendered practices and patterns, writing consultants can be trained to open up discussions of gender disparities in STEM publishing and to direct writers to places where they can find impactful and diverse voices in their field. It is already common practice to train consultants in helping writers find and evaluate sources. Rather than reinventing the wheel, directors can provide consultants with some open-ended, gender-related questions to include in these conversations. For example, consultants might ask writers, "have you ever considered gender when selecting your sources? Do you think a lot of women are represented in the research you do?" If writers seem open to these questions and the conversations they evoke, then consultants can take the lead in directing writers to resources to make their work

more gender-inclusive.

During consultations, one of the easiest ways to help writers work toward decreasing gender disparities in STEMM publishing is to inform them about online directories and databases featuring women and minorities in STEMM. While consulting time is often limited, it takes just a few minutes to mention that there are great directories for finding women's and minority voices if students are so inclined. One such resource is *Request a Woman Scientist*, a website created by the organization 500 Women Scientists. This site offers a directory of women scientists with a variety of expertise as well as a continually growing list of websites and databases focused on women and minorities in STEMM disciplines. Consultants can also direct writers to discipline-specific resources, including, just to name a few, *DiversifyEEB*, a site dedicated to "highlighting ecologists and evolutionary biologists who are women and/or underrepresented minorities"; *Women Also Know Stuff*, a site offering a registry of female experts in behavioral research; *anneslist*, a blog that lists female neuroscientists and their expertise; the *Brookings Institute's SourceList*, which includes lists of female (and, in the future, minority) experts in technology; and the Women in Machine Learning's site, *Supporting Women in Machine Learning*, which provides a directory of women in the field. Introducing writers to directories of women scientists is a small act that needn't take a lot of time during consultations, and centers can make such lists even more accessible by linking them on their websites. Writing centers can also encourage students to begin their own lists of diverse experts by consulting with colleagues and reviewing existing research within their disciplines.

### **CONCRETE STRATEGIES: RHETORICAL APPROACHES TO SOURCE DOCUMENTATION**

There are also many ways writing centers can encourage writers to consider how disciplinary values, including social attitudes about gender, shape the sentence-level rules of citation styles. On the WCenter listserv, Sue Mendelsohn has shared an activity I have used many times with great success that is designed to help students think critically about the rhetoric behind sentence-level details of citation style. The activity asks students to compare a journal article citation in various styles and to consider why disciplines organize and punctuate citations in their particular style. When I have used this activity in workshops, students easily pick up on the value systems embedded within these organizational and grammatical choices.

During group workshops or one-to-one consultations, writing center staff can hone in on the purpose and perhaps gendered

implications of specific stylistic requirements, such as the use of initial-only bibliographic citations in most STEMM documentation systems, to name one example. Most scientific citation systems use first initials rather than full first names (for example, AMA, APA, CSE), and almost all citation systems, including those used outside of the sciences, eliminate the names of some contributing authors altogether (for example, MLA). While initial-only citation systems have their roots in scientific style's commitment to concision and reflect the reality of multi-member research teams, they also have gendered implications. According to Jevin West et al., in the early- and mid-twentieth century, in addition to aiding in concision, initial-only systems discouraged gender discrimination in publishing during decades when women were entering the disciplines in larger numbers and facing discrimination. While the anonymity provided by STEMM citation styles might once have played a positive role, the same systems today may inadvertently contribute to biased authorship and research practices by obfuscating women and their contributions. It is easy to think that women are valued and active in STEMM research, or to assume their disinterest in such fields, if one cannot easily identify their names on a bibliography. "J. Smith" might refer to "Joe" or "Jennifer." Of course, writing centers must be cognizant of the limitations of this discussion, as many names are gender neutral or may not be indicative of gender to North American and Western European readers. And, while using full names may make it easier to identify women's participation (or lack thereof) in STEMM research, using full names could also still lead to gender bias in the publication process, as reviewers may be less likely to publish pieces if they see a woman's name attached, especially if the name is in a prominent author position.

Writing consultants are positioned to point out all of these possibilities during consultations and writing workshops so that students can understand the rhetorical and social implications of what many perceive to be arbitrary stylistic and grammatical details. I am not suggesting that writing centers push for changes in citation styles—the omission of full names and other citation practices that may come under observation serve a practical purpose in the sciences, and it is up to the discourse communities creating these systems to make changes. Instead, I am proposing that writing centers push students to think critically about the ways citation practices, whether intentionally or not, operate rhetorically and socially, and how they might impact gender equity in STEMM dependent upon different contexts. Students are not positioned to push back on these norms by altering citation styles, but by becoming more conscientious of the gendered implications of citation practices, they can become more deliberate about



inclusion and source selection in their own research if challenging the status quo is important to them.

In a similar vein, I often ask students to investigate the history of changes to documentation styles, looking specifically for the rationale behind the changes, in order to get them to see citation practices as rhetorical and socially constructed. This conversation often arises organically when students come in to the writing center frustrated that a documentation style has undergone another update and they must learn the new version. This is an ideal opening for conversations about the social and rhetorical dimensions of documenting sources. A timely and encouraging example is APA's recent publication of a 7<sup>th</sup> edition that addresses concerns related to gender through changes such as the allowance of the gender-inclusive, singular "they" (American Psychological Association 140). Historically-based exercises like these teach students that citation conventions are fluid and change over time; what was once useful in a discipline may no longer promote equity or the evolving goals of the field. As future contributors to their discipline, STEMM students can become more adept at understanding the connections between documentation styles and the relationships, values, and norms of their respective disciplines, thereby engaging critically in debates and shifts within their fields.

In sum, in order to facilitate greater consideration of gender equity in STEMM, writing centers can train their staff on the rhetorical dimensions of source selection and documentation. They can also develop more activities like those mentioned here that enable students to see the rhetorical components of citation styles. Citation styles are living, breathing systems that both reflect and shape the values of the fields that use them. By becoming more familiar with the rhetoric of STEMM citation styles, writing center practitioners can be better prepared to support writers to become responsible, informed researchers, readers, and writers in the scientific disciplines.

## NOTES

1. Although this article limits its scope to discussions of gender equity due to page constraints, I believe rhetorical approaches to teaching citation systems should be intersectional, focusing not just on gender, but also on race, class, ability, and other identity markers that may contribute to inequities in STEMM publishing.

2. While the acronym STEM has been in use since the early 2000s, the addition of another "M," indicative of "Medicine," is relatively new. I use it in this article to reflect the growing number of students in the United States pursuing degrees and careers in medicine and the health sciences.

3. Dissertation boot camps and writing groups to reach STEMM writers are frequently discussed (Blake et al.; Lee and Golde; Gradin et al.). Sohui Lee and Russ Carpenter (2017) have argued for the use of the scientific research posters to teach

multimodal composing to students, including those in STEM programs. And scholars such as Amanda Greenwell (2017) and Beth Rapp Young (2001) have recommended rhetorical, disciplinary guides and heuristics to assist STEM writers.

4. Within the contexts of writing centers, specifically, see Susan Mueller, who advocates for a rhetorical approach to citing in the writing center in order to teach that documentation systems are not “an interchangeable hodge-podge,” but rather a way to align oneself with the work and values of a discipline (6).



## WORKS CITED

- 500 Women Scientists. *Request a Woman Scientist*, n.d., [500womenscientists.org/request-a-scientist](http://500womenscientists.org/request-a-scientist).
- American Psychological Association. *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*. 7<sup>th</sup> ed., American Psychological Association, 2019.
- Annelist. Annelist: *Highlighting Female Systems Neuroscientists*. n.d., [annelist.net/](http://annelist.net/).
- Blake, Brandy, et al. “Just Write? ...Not Quite: Writing ‘Procedure’ for STEM-Focused Dissertation Boot Camps.” *The Writing Lab Newsletter*, vol. 39, no. 9-10, 2015, pp. 13-17.
- Brookings Institute. *Sourcelist*. Brookings Institute, n.d., [sourcelist.org/](http://sourcelist.org/).
- Connors, Robert J. “The Rhetoric of Citation Systems: Part I: The Development of Annotation Structures from the Renaissance to 1900.” *Rhetoric Review*, vol. 17, no. 1, 1998, pp. 6-48, [www.jstor.org/stable/465742](http://www.jstor.org/stable/465742).
- DiversifyEEB. DiversifyEEB, 2019, [diversifyeeb.com/](http://diversifyeeb.com/).
- Gradin, Sherrie, et al. “Disciplinary Differences, Rhetorical Resonances: Graduate Writing Groups beyond the Humanities.” *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2006, n.p., [www.praxisuwc.com/new-page-83](http://www.praxisuwc.com/new-page-83).
- Greenwell, Amanda M. “Rhetorical Reading Guides, Readerly Experiences, and WID in the Writing Center.” *WLN: A Journal of Writing Center Scholarship*, vol. 41, no. 7-8, 2017, pp. 9-16.
- Holman, Luke, et al. “The Gender Gap in Science: How Long until Women Are Equally Represented?” *PLoS Biology*, vol. 14, no. 4, 2018, p. e2004956. doi. [org/10.1371/journal.pbio.2004956](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pbio.2004956).
- King, Molly M., et al. “Men Set Their Own Cites High: Gender and Self-Citation Across Fields and Over Time.” *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World*, vol. 3, 2017, pp. 1-22. doi: [10.1177/23780231177338903](https://doi.org/10.1177/23780231177338903).
- LaFrance, Adrienne. “I Analyzed a Year of My Reporting and This is What I Found.” *Medium*, 30 Sept. 2013, [medium.com/ladybits-on-medium/i-analyzed-a-year-of-my-reporting-for-gender-bias-and-this-is-what-i-found-a16c31e1cdf](https://medium.com/ladybits-on-medium/i-analyzed-a-year-of-my-reporting-for-gender-bias-and-this-is-what-i-found-a16c31e1cdf).
- Lee, Sohui, and Russ Carpenter. “Design and Pitch: Introducing Multiliteracies through Scientific Research Posters.” *The Writing Center Journal*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2017, pp. 205-232.
- Lee, Sohui, and Chris Golde. “Completing the Dissertation and Beyond: Writing Centers and Dissertation Boot Camps.” *The Writing Lab Newsletter*, vol. 37, no. 7-8, 2013, pp. 1-5.
- Mendelsohn, Sue. “Re: Interactive Approaches to Teaching APA Style.” *WCenter Listserv*, International Writing Centers Association, 14 Sept. 2016.
- Mueller, Susan. “Documentation Styles and Discipline-Specific Values.” *The Writing Lab Newsletter*, vol. 29, no. 6, 2005, pp. 6-9, [wlnjournal.org/archives/v29/29.6.pdf](http://wlnjournal.org/archives/v29/29.6.pdf).

- National Science Foundation. *Women, Minorities, and Persons with Disabilities in Science and Engineering*. National Science Foundation & National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2018, [nsf.gov/statistics/2017/nsf17310/digest/glossary-and-key-to-acronyms/](https://www.nsf.gov/statistics/2017/nsf17310/digest/glossary-and-key-to-acronyms/).
- Rapp Young, Beth. "Using Heuristics from Other Disciplines in the Writing Center." *The Writing Lab Newsletter*, vol. 25, no. 9, 2001, pp. 6-8.
- Wang, Meng-Ti, and Jessica Degol. "Gender Gap in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM): Current Knowledge, Implications for Practice, Policy, and Future Directions." *Educational Psychology Review*, vol. 29, 2017, pp. 119-40. doi: 10.1007/s10648-015-9355-x.
- West, Jevin D., et al. "The Role of Gender in Scholarly Authorship." *PLOS ONE*, vol. 8, no. 7, 22 July, 2013, n.p., [doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0066212](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0066212).
- Women Also Know Stuff. *Women Also Know Stuff*. 2019, [womenalsoknowstuff.com/](https://www.womenalsoknowstuff.com/).

## Tutors' Column: "'I'm a Terrible Writer': Helping Students Who Lack Confidence"

Ash Thoms

University of Nevada, Reno



Students come to the writing center to look at varying aspects of their writing, and they each bring their own challenges to the table. These challenges are as individualized as the students, but one challenge I see frequently is a lack of self-confidence. I can identify low confidence in a student pretty quickly because I also struggle with this issue in my own writing. I feel that if my writing isn't "good enough," then I'm not "good enough" as a person because my writing is strongly tied to my identity.

Time and time again, I have heard students say they aren't good writers. This statement prefaces so many appointments, almost as if the student is saying, "Please don't think this is who I am." Self-efficacy in writers has been examined by many scholars. Roger Bruning, et al. argue that because writing is challenging, writers make judgments of and connections to themselves through writing (28). When writers struggle with certain aspects of composition—word choice, forming ideas, grammar, organization, etc.—they feel less effective and proficient. Bruning et al. also argue that the writer's judgments about writing *become* that writer's identity (28). In other words, if writing is viewed negatively or as excessively challenging, the writer is likely to say they are not a good writer.

A common determiner of whether a piece of writing is good is whether it both fits assignment parameters and enters into the dialogue of a particular field of study. Ken Hyland reinforces this view, saying writing is evaluated on its ability to maintain the style of its field of study (1093). He explains that while undergraduate students are not expected to fit into a particular academic community, they are, however, evaluated based on their ability to fit into multiple communities' discussions using the language established by those communities (1094). This is one of the many reasons that student writers may not consider themselves good writers: they do not feel as though they fit into the specialized

discussions of multiple academic fields. It is challenging to take personal thoughts and community expectations and meld them together, which can lead to a lack of room for personal thought in academic writing. Furthermore, the expectation that a student will use the language of a wide variety of communities, combined with the failure to fit into all of them, leads students to the belief that they are not good writers and can even deter them from identifying as writers.

I've already mentioned that "writer" is in itself an identity. I identify as a writer, though it took me an incredible amount of time to get to that point. It isn't uncommon to have a student come in to the writing center and deny being a writer. While my personal definition of "writer" is someone who writes, students seem to define "writer" as someone who is "good" at writing. "Good" is subjective for each student, but grades and feedback play into it heavily. "Good" is also dependent on context beyond academia: when did the student learn how to write? where? did they get praise? and so many other questions and thoughts come into play. While there are various reasons why students don't consider themselves good writers, the fact remains that writing centers frequently see these students. How, then, do we help these students to realize they aren't doing everything wrong?

Active listening can be a fundamental building block in helping a student build confidence. While active listening is a broad approach, the most important points in active listening to focus on are reflection and engaged interest. When a tutor reflects what a student is saying and actively shows interest in the topic, their student is more likely to feel safe in the environment. This safety allows the student to gain confidence in their writing and their knowledge of the topic they are writing about. For example, when I went into the writing center as a student with an economics paper, I prefaced the appointment by telling my tutor—who was and remains a close friend—that I really had no idea what my goal was with the paper. I had no confidence. I brought up the assignment parameters, and we started bouncing ideas around. Her reflection questions, such as "You mentioned politics as part of diversity, could you expand on that?" encouraged me to explain my ideas in a clear manner. Explaining my ideas made me realize I had a lot to say on the topic, which gave me confidence.

Another part of active listening that I feel is equally important, engaged interest, can be even more challenging than encouraging confidence-building. Showing interest in a paper that you may have read twenty versions of in a month can feel disingenuous. While tutors may find that not every topic is interesting, there will be

something interesting in each student's perspective of the topic, and that is where engaged interest comes in. Showing interest in the way a student thinks, and how they portray that in their writing, helps to show the student they are more than just their written work. This is an important concept because, in order to increase a student's confidence, we must work with them as people, not just with the papers they produce.

Building a positive relationship, or rapport, is another element in helping students who lack self-confidence and/or do not identify as writers. As a student, I feel incredible anxiety going into peer review workshops. If the peer I meet with is friendly in discussing both my paper and the ideas/experiences behind my paper, I am much more comfortable receiving feedback. This experience is relevant to tutoring sessions as well; tutors can disarm the fear students feel about having their work viewed by another person. If fear is removed from the equation, it will be easier for a student to discuss the reason(s) they feel their writing is terrible; the understanding that the tutor will be non-judgmental will make open expression more comfortable. Building rapport is born of active listening—if a tutor is actively listening to their student, they will be able to better address the anxiety or fear that the student feels. Building rapport makes it easier for students to be vulnerable, discuss ideas, and take feedback because there is less threat of judgment.

Positive feedback is another important method to help students who lack confidence. While we as tutors feel a need to get through what a student identifies as the "issues" in a paper during our short time with them, noting positive aspects of their writing can greatly benefit confidence levels. As a student, when I get comments from professors on something I did well in my writing, I deny them. This reaction is in part because of my own anxiety about positive feedback, but also because I don't recognize when I do something well. My very patient professors discuss why that aspect of my writing is positive, which gives me confidence and helps me to understand what to replicate in future writing assignments. Without my professors walking me through why I did well, I deny their compliments all together. While in tutoring sessions, explaining what is functioning well in a paper may seem to take time away from the "productive" work, doing so can help the student gain much needed confidence.

Above all else, a tutor must work to understand why a student feels they are not a good writer. Sometimes this means giving entire consultations to conversations about writing or comparisons of writing to something the student loves. Sometimes this means disarming the anxiety the student comes in with by having a casual



conversation about pretty dogs or cats. Sometimes this means approaching writing in a way that isn't the typical brainstorm, outline, draft, edit, submit cycle. All of the time this means breaking down our walls as tutors to meet the student where they are and being vulnerable ourselves. To help students who lack confidence, we must be able to connect through emotional understanding and appear more as a peer and less as an authority. Whenever I have a student who prefaces their session with "I'm a terrible writer" or a similar statement, I reflect on all the times I have said that same phrase and think back to what I wanted and needed in those moments. I remind myself that students are people beyond their written work and their writing ability. I believe we have to meet such students by connecting to their anxiety so that we can help them work through it. After all, doesn't everyone lack confidence in some aspect of their existence, including us? What better reason is there for accepting that writing center tutors should use all available methods to help anxious students build their confidence up from the ground floor?



#### **WORKS CITED**

- Bruning, Roger, et al. "Examining Dimensions of Self-efficacy for Writing." *Journal of Educational Psychology*, vol. 105, no. 1, 2013, pp. 25–38.
- Hyland, Ken. "Authority and Invisibility: Authorial Identity in Academic Writing." *Journal of Pragmatics*, vol. 34, no. 8, 2002, pp. 1091–1112.

## Announcements & Updates

### STAFF OR FACULTY?

*In the November/December 2019 issue of WLN, we asked for suggestions in responding to a reader's question about a new position being created at his institution. Should it be a staff or faculty position? Why? He asked for our help in formulating a short, convincing answer to give to the Dean. In response, Lindsey Gay sent in the following:*

At my institution, we've recently added my position (Director of the Center for Teaching and Learning) and the Writing Lab Coordinator's position to our faculty bargaining unit by reclassifying those positions from Staff to Faculty. There's a possibility that we might be classified as "Administrative Faculty," which is a recognized but under-utilized classification in our university policies (that negotiation is still ongoing, but the gist of it is, we're recognized as faculty at last). In this process, I broke down our roles as such for our Provost, VCAA, and other upper-level academic admins:

These positions fall more into the "faculty" end of the spectrum because although they have administrative duties, they are primarily academic in nature. We must stay up-to-date on current research around writing program administration and rhetoric/composition pedagogy; we teach students how to be writing tutors/consultants; we publish and attend conferences in our discipline; we lead pedagogy workshops for graduate students and faculty; and we teach academic writing courses when the need arises. All in all, we support the University's academic mission in much the same way that teaching or research faculty do, just spread across a wider variety of duties.

Lindsey Gay  
Antioch University Seattle

## WANT TO SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS? CHECK THE *WLN* BLOG: CONNECTING WRITING CENTERS ACROSS BORDERS.

*WLN's* CWCAB blog is a great way to quickly share and connect with colleagues directing or working in writing centers around the world. Post questions, find advice and recommendations, and share ideas and scholarship in one place: [www.wlnjournal.org/blog](http://www.wlnjournal.org/blog). Help grow our community and enhance our global virtual conversation, ideally both in English and in other languages.

*Please join by **subscribing to the blog***. You can do so on the blog homepage in the right-hand column. When you subscribe, you will receive a post notification every time we post new content.

The *WLN* blog also has a newsletter you can receive at the end of each academic semester. It's a great way to get highlights of your colleagues' contributions on the blog. **Subscribe to the blog newsletter** by visiting: [www.wlnjournal.org/blog/our-newsletter](http://www.wlnjournal.org/blog/our-newsletter).

**Do you want to post an article on the blog?** You don't need to be a member to share something. You can include photos, pictures of your writing center, and other visuals. Email our *WLN* blog editor, Anna Habib, at [writinglabnewsletterblog@gmail.com](mailto:writinglabnewsletterblog@gmail.com) for more details.

### GET INVOLVED WITH *WLN*

**Interested in serving as a reviewer?** Contact Karen Gabrielle Johnson ([KGJohnson@ship.edu](mailto:KGJohnson@ship.edu)), Ted Roggenbuck ([troggenb@bloomu.edu](mailto:troggenb@bloomu.edu)), Lee Ann Glowzinski ([laglowzinski@gmail.com](mailto:laglowzinski@gmail.com)), and Julie Bleakney ([jbleakney@elon.edu](mailto:jbleakney@elon.edu)).

**Interested in contributing news, announcements, or accounts of work in your writing center to the Blog (photos welcomed)?** Contact Anna Sophia Habib ([ahabib@gmu.edu](mailto:ahabib@gmu.edu)).

**Interested in guest editing a special issue on a topic of your choice?** Contact Muriel Harris ([harrism@purdue.edu](mailto:harrism@purdue.edu)).

**Interested in writing an article or Tutors' Column to submit to *WLN*?** Check the guidelines on the website: ([wlnjournal.org/submit.php](http://wlnjournal.org/submit.php)).

## Conference Calendar

**March 5-7, 2020: East Central Writing Centers Association, in Indianapolis, IN**

Contact: Mark Latta: [mlatta@marian.edu](mailto:mlatta@marian.edu); conference website: [marian.edu/ecwcca2020](http://marian.edu/ecwcca2020).

**March 6-7, 2020: Mid-Atlantic Writing Centers Association, in Towson, MD**

Contact: Carmen Meza: [cmeza@towson.edu](mailto:cmeza@towson.edu); conference website: [mawca.org/2020-conference](http://mawca.org/2020-conference).

**March 12-14, 2020: Midwest Writing Center Association, in Cedar Rapids, IA**

Contact: Ben Thiel: [bthiel@mtmercy.edu](mailto:bthiel@mtmercy.edu) and Kristin Risley: [risleyk@uwstout.edu](mailto:risleyk@uwstout.edu); conference website: [midwestwritingcenters.org/conference/2020/](http://midwestwritingcenters.org/conference/2020/).

**March 12-14, 2020: South Central Writing Center Association, in Stillwater, OK**

Contact: Anna Sicari: [anna.sicari@okstate.edu](mailto:anna.sicari@okstate.edu); conference website: [scwca.net](http://scwca.net).

**March 13-14, 2020: Secondary School Writing Centers Association, in Arlington, VA**

Contact: [sswca.board@gmail.com](mailto:sswca.board@gmail.com); conference website: [sswca.org/sswca-conference/call-for-proposals/](http://sswca.org/sswca-conference/call-for-proposals/).

**April 10-11, 2020: Pacific Northwest Writing Centers Association, in Bothell, WA**

Contact: Erik Echols: [eechols@uw.edu](mailto:eechols@uw.edu) and Kim Sharp: [ksharp@shoreline.edu](mailto:ksharp@shoreline.edu); conference website: [pnwca.org/2020-Conference-CFP](http://pnwca.org/2020-Conference-CFP)

**April 24-25, 2020: Colorado Wyoming Writing Centers Association, Pueblo, CO**

Contact: Chad Pickering: [chad.pickering@csupueblo.edu](mailto:chad.pickering@csupueblo.edu); conference website: [www.cwwca.com](http://www.cwwca.com).

**July 8-11, 2020: European Writing Centers Association, in Graz, Austria**

Contact: Doris Pany: [schreibzentrum@uni-graz.at](mailto:schreibzentrum@uni-graz.at); conference website: [europeanwritingcenters.eu/conference.html](http://europeanwritingcenters.eu/conference.html).



## ***WLN: A Journal of Writing Center Scholarship***

***WLN: A Journal of Writing Center Scholarship***, published bi-monthly, from September to June, is a peer-reviewed publication of the International Writing Centers Association, an NCTE Assembly, and is a member of the NCTE Information Exchange Agreement. ISSN 1040-3779. All Rights and Title reserved unless permission is granted by WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER LLC. Material can not be reproduced in any form without express written permission. However, up to 50 copies of an article may be reproduced under fair use policy for educational, non-commercial use in classes or course packets. Proper acknowledgment of title, author, and publication date should be included.

Editor: **Muriel Harris** (harrism@purdue.edu)

Blog Editor: **Anna Sophia Habib** (ahabib@gmu.edu)

### **Managed and Produced by**

TWENTY SIX DESIGN LLC under agreement with

WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER LLC

52 Riley Road #380, Celebration, FL 34747

(866) 556-1743

[www.wlnjournal.org](http://www.wlnjournal.org)

[support@wlnjournal.org](mailto:support@wlnjournal.org)

### **Subscriptions, Archives, Resources, and Manuscript Submissions:**

Visit [www.wlnjournal.org](http://www.wlnjournal.org) for subscription information, free archive access, resources, and manuscript submission guidelines.

# WLD

A Journal of Writing Center Scholarship

WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER, LLC.

52 Riley Road #380

Celebration, FL 34747

PRSR STD  
US POSTAGE  
PAID  
ORLANDO, FL  
PERMIT 3172



wlnjournal



WLNjournal