



WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER



Vol. V, No. 2 (October, 1980)

That writing labs continue to flourish is evident in the wealth of forthcoming materials and meetings. A book of articles written by members of our newsletter group and edited by myself, entitled Tutoring Writing: A Sourcebook for Writing Labs, is scheduled for publication by Scott, Foresman and Co. and will (if all goes well) appear on the market next summer. In addition, Jossey-Bass will be publishing The Growth of Writing Centers, edited by Phyllis Brooks and Thom Hawkins, and the Writing Center Journal is scheduled to begin in the winter. In February, a conference on writing labs will be held at the University of Alabama, and in March there will again be a Special Interest Session on Writing Labs at CCCC. We'll try to keep you informed of all of these events and to provide details in future issues of the newsletter.

As writing labs continue to win their place in writing programs, it is important that we keep in touch with one another to share our problems, suggestions, questions, and even occasional solutions. Please send these along with your articles, book reviews, names of new members, and donations of \$3 (with checks made payable to me) to:

Muriel Harris, editor
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WRITING CENTER WORKSHOPS: A WAY TO REACH OUT

It has not been uncommon for colleagues to assume that the Writing Center exists for remedial level activities only. Certainly remedial work is a large and important part of our efforts, but we have also been concerned about extending our service. We specifically wanted to attract more students, encourage faculty participation, and expand

our role as a resource for the entire university. We offered a series of workshops first to English Composition courses to meet these goals.

Our earliest workshops dealt not only with basic skills--sentence structure, spelling, and punctuation--but with organizational skills as well. We offered workshops on topics ranging from reference tools to parallelism. A special series designed for term paper writers concerning footnote and bibliography form and handling quotations and paraphrase was established. Finally, we set up workshops on organizing in-class essays, especially for students facing midterm and final exams.

The focus for all our workshops was to explain the particular concept and to reinforce it with immediate group practice, especially since the classroom teacher cannot always afford time for practice with individual student writing problems, and students may not always see what their peers are writing in classroom activities.

We have offered our workshops for composition classes for the past two quarters and have made some evaluations. The effects of our workshops were beneficial:

A. To the English Department

1. We increased communication among English teachers, especially when teachers brought their entire class to a workshop. We had two teachers in the same classroom--a new experience for some. At least, the visiting teacher was exposed to a possibly different approach. At best the classroom teacher and Writing Center instructor shared their methods through discussion.

B. To the students

1. Students received an added bonus through group work. They often had

the opportunity to see what other students were writing and sometimes discovered they shared particular weakness or strengths.

2. Students were exposed to another teacher's approach, which perhaps insured a well-rounded introduction to composition.

C. To the Writing Center

1. Teaching materials were developed. Many of the Writing Center instructors had developed excellent tutoring techniques or teaching methods, but they were usually only conveyed through individual tutoring sessions. Preparation for Writing Center workshops enabled instructors to put their techniques on paper to share with all staff members as well as students.
2. Videotaping workshops helped develop tutoring skills. It provided Writing Center instructors with a visual record of their teaching performance. Furthermore, tapes could be excellent means of training peer tutors. Student lessons could be developed from videotapes.
3. Students were reached more effectively and efficiently. Greater numbers of students were reached, especially when an entire class attended a workshop. Writing Center efficiency was also increased since a workshop could eliminate several simultaneous tutoring sessions on the same material.

Our workshops did present some problems, although we developed reasonable solutions to them. First of all, classroom teacher and Writing Center instructor approaches to the same material sometimes differed. We found that this need not be an obstacle, however. We simply did not assume that the approaches were similar. Thus, out of courtesy and the desire to share, we clearly outlined the workshop approach to the visiting teacher.

The other problem that concerned us was poor attendance. We dealt effectively with this by advertising our workshops through the school newspaper, faculty notices, and tutoring sessions. In fact, tutoring sessions were one of our best sources of referral. The student who actively seeks help in a tutoring session and is directed to some

special help the workshop promises will likely attend.

While the Writing Center workshops for students in composition courses were certainly successful, they did not provide total satisfaction for our aim of expanding our services and widening our scope as a university resource.

Therefore, we decided to encourage the participation of faculty from other disciplines in an effort to establish workshops for their students. We sent a questionnaire to all university faculty asking three specific questions:

1. Have you ever referred students from your classes to the Writing Center? If so, for what kinds of help? If not, why not? (We asked this question basically to determine how familiar the faculty was with our services and how willing they had been in the past to utilize them.)
2. Would you be interested in working with us to develop workshops aimed toward writing in your discipline? (Here is where we hoped to make our contacts outside the English Department.)
3. Please suggest topics for future Writing Center workshops. (This not only gave us concrete information from those who were willing to work with us, but also provided some interesting ideas from those who did not want to invest their time.)

We sent the questionnaire and hoped for one willing response. We were pleasantly surprised to receive 46 answers, 15 of the replies came from faculty willing to work with us to set up workshops about writing in their disciplines. Every college at YSU was represented except one--Fine and Performing Arts.

The disciplines which opened up to us were widely varied--history, nursing, political science, biology, engineering, chemistry, advertising and public relations, management, and marketing. Each one had specific requests for workshops:

- History: writing in-class essay exams and research paper writing
- Nursing: writing nursing reports and writing for nursing publications
- Political Science: organizing essay exams
- Biology: documentation for scientific papers
- Engineering: thesis writing
- Chemistry: writing lab reports

Advertising/Public Relations: writing public relations news releases
 Management: writing case studies
 Marketing: writing essay exams

To date we have met with faculty from history, nursing, management, and political science, and several strategies have been established. We have decided to develop workshops for history students in a freshman level survey course. The workshops will be aimed at helping students write effective in-class essays. Students will be given a pre-midterm--a list of possible essay questions--and Writing Center instructors will hold workshops emphasizing brainstorming and methods of organization. Announcement of the workshops will be listed in the history course syllabus along with a description of the pre-midterm exam.

Our meeting with faculty from the Nursing Department has resulted in several plans of activity. First of all, Writing Center instructors will aid the nursing faculty in their development of self-learning packages for students. We will also establish workshops for students geared to writing nursing reports and writing for nursing publications. The nursing faculty has plans to build this emphasis on writing and our workshops into their curriculum.

From the School of Business we have met with the director of the Small Business Institute. He has given us a manual of guidelines students must follow in preparing their case studies. Our workshops concerning this material will be presented to his classes soon.

Finally, we have met with political science faculty at their department meeting. They have asked us to present workshops to their students about writing essay exams.

Obviously, the establishment of workshops for students of other disciplines demands a tremendous amount of work from the Writing Center staff. We must not only become aware of the special concerns in each discipline (i.e., what are the characteristics of nursing publications?), but we also must develop workshop techniques that can effectively combine those concerns and our own ability to teach composition. We can rely on the faculty we have contacted to help us to understand writing in their disciplines. The rest is up to us.

While the work ahead of us is enormous, it is also gratifying and terribly exciting.

We have before us the opportunity to widen our service and expand our role as a resource to the entire university.

Cynthia K. Stroud
 Youngstown State University

THREE APPROACHES TO TEACHING: THE LABORATORY ALTERNATIVE

The freshman English program at the University of Alabama in Birmingham consists of two quarters of composition. The minimum grade for satisfactorily completing these courses is "C." In addition to achieving the passing grade in the first course, a student must also pass by 70% each section of a standardized five-part exit examination which is given on the last day of class. This standard applies to all students enrolled in a degree program at the University. Transfer students who have completed freshman composition at other schools are expected to pass the exams before they are admitted into upper-level programs such as Teacher Education or Engineering. The strict standard for competence in reading and writing necessitates an English Laboratory where students can remedy their weak academic skills.

Freshman composition classes at UAB are generally taught by lectures. This style is familiar to and acceptable for a majority of our students. However, for the students who do not respond well to this type of instruction, the English Lab offers alternative approaches. The Lab offers one-to-one tutoring, self-paced instruction, and computer assisted instruction in addition to lectures that follow up classroom presentations.

One-to-one tutoring is by far the most requested form of instruction offered by the Lab. A student makes a 30 minute appointment with a tutor. During that session the student and tutor may work on a specific concept such as subject-verb agreement, or they may revise a theme, or they may simply discuss general problems the student has encountered in his composition course. No precise format dictates the one-to-one tutoring session. The relaxed atmosphere of this mode of instruction and the attention to the student's particular problems create a learning situation that often produces spectacular results. Follow-up studies indicate that consistent one-to-one tutoring provides a significant increase in both the persistence rate and grade increase of the students. Another advantage that cannot be quantified, but can easily be detected, is the positive

attitude toward learning and the satisfaction of having succeeded displayed by a number of these students.

Another mode of instruction used in the Writing Lab is self-paced instruction. Although a few students request "tapes" or "books," this approach is generally instituted at the request of a tutor. I seriously use the term "request"; if a student does not want this type of instruction, some other method is used.

Self-paced instruction is reserved for two types of students: those who need limited review in one specific area, such as punctuation, and those whose skills are so weak that they need to begin at the basic level of identifying a sentence. For the first group, the good students, the self-paced review allows them to clear up a misconception or learn something they had missed with a minimum of time and effort. We have cassette tapes and workbooks which cover almost any problem in reading and composition. The student can come to the Lab and work with these materials at his convenience, without an appointment, since he does not require constant attention. Of course, a tutor is available to answer questions or set up equipment if the student needs help.

The second group--students who need help with everything--is assigned to self-paced instruction primarily because of the time consideration. Even with a staff of 15, we simply cannot devote a disproportionate amount of time to one student while others who might be helped more go wanting. Making the decision to relegate a weak student completely to self-paced instruction is a difficult, but necessary fact of a busy English Lab. Of course, in this case as with the other students, tutors are always available to answer questions.

The self-paced instruction aids that we use range in grade levels from 6-16. In addition to our own handouts, exercises, tapes, and tests, we often use the Educulture Series in writing, spelling, and thinking; the Harcourt Brace Jovanovich series 2200, 2600, and 3200; Rizzo's The Writer's Studio; and Fawcett's Grassroots.

The better students using self-paced instruction find their problems cleared up quickly and with a minimal amount of effort. The weak students often spend a great deal of time in the Lab and show improvement--more than they would have with no additional instruction, but usually not as much as either they or we would prefer.

The final type of help offered by the Lab is computer assisted instruction. We have had our system two years, but we have not heavily relied on its use. Our greatest limitation with CAI is its physical inconvenience. The CRT's are not located in the Humanities building, and so we must rely on two factors over which we have little control: the student's willingness to make an extra trip across campus, and another person's willingness to assist the student once he has reached the appropriate building.

Assuming the student and technician converge at the CRT--and fewer than two percent do--the student will find himself faced with an IBM coursewriter COMSKL program called "An Interactive Computer Assisted Instruction Learning System In English Communication Skills," a program in grammar and mechanics similar to the self-paced texts housed in the Lab. One decided disadvantage to this mode of instruction is that no tutor is on hand to answer questions the student might pose.

A second, more promising CAI program is an English as a Second Language series purchased from Notre Dame. This program deals not only with grammar and usage, but also with function words, syntax, and idioms. Foreign nationals can use the program to improve their written language as well as idiomatic expressions in conversation.

We hope one day to house the terminals in the English Lab itself so that CAI can be more productively integrated into our program. Its value in ESL is undeniable and its potential in grammar review and testing is promising. For now, however, we find that CAI's benefits have not matched either its expense or inconvenience. With the exception of its use for ESL, the Lab staff can easily surpass the benefits of the present system.

The English Lab at UAB is service oriented. Its purpose is to provide help to students who have problems in reading and writing. Currently we average working with 250 students a week, about 20% of those enrolled in freshman composition. We strive to tailor programs to the individual's needs so that their education can proceed as efficiently as possible. In order to do this, we have met the challenge of offering a variety of approaches to teaching.

Peggy Jolly
Univ. of Alabama in Birmingham



One of the latest books to be published for use in writing labs is The Comp-Lab Exercises (Prentice-Hall, 1980) by Mary Epes, Carolyn Kirkpatrick, and Michael G. Southwell. The purpose of this book, according to the authors, is to teach basic writing students--those with nonstandard English or foreign language speech background--how to edit their work. The authors caution teachers that the "book is not intended to comprise a complete basic writing course" and that the exercises should be used as part of or as a supplement to a course which deals with the composing process. The tutorial format of this program cuts the costs for this part of the instruction and allows instructors more time to help students with composing.

Based on their own experiences in teaching writing at York College-CUNY, the authors have divided the book into twelve modules that include some major problem areas that basic writing students encounter. To help these students learn to edit their own writings, the modules cover writing conventions, wrong words, noun plurals, verb agreement, verb tenses, uses of the verbs be, have, and do, sentence construction, sentence combining, and run-ons and fragments. Both the content and the format clearly show that the authors developed this book from their first-hand experiences with students. The explanations of the rules are both simple and clear, using only a minimum of grammatical terminology; there are many practice exercises to reinforce each concept; the content of the exercises is interesting, contemporary, and appropriate for basic writing students; there are many proofreading exercises; and each module concludes with a review exercise. Other features include special emphasis of the verb system and a common-sense approach to grammar. For example, even though there is no module called "punctuation," comma rules are explained in the sentence combining and sentence construction sections. In addition, audiotapes that explain the rules more fully than does the book are now available.

Although this program has been extensively field-tested, it still does contain some minor errors and omissions which could easily be corrected in later printings. In the chapter on wrong words, for instance, actual examples of the correct usage of words that sound and look alike would be more helpful than merely sending the students to the dictionary. In the module on noun plural forms,

the rule for adding es to make nouns ending in ss, sh, ch, x, or zz plural is omitted.

The writing tests at the end of each chapter are an attempt at making students apply their newly acquired editing skills to their own writings. However, asking students to write a twelve sentence paragraph using a verb phrase with the helping verb have in every sentence seems to work against what students might have been taught about composing. Although some of the control may be lost, the writing tests should be made less artificial and closer to real writing situations.

Despite these minor flaws, The Comp-Lab Exercises is a useful tool for teaching basic writing students editing skills, providing that the modules are used according to the authors' original plan of being part of a writing course rather than an isolated activity relegated to the writing lab. The authors stress that even though the benefits of this autotutorial program are great, what goes on in a classroom is more important. Every learner needs a person who cares about what he is learning and who encourages him in his progress, and this person is the classroom teacher. In other words, the value of this book diminishes greatly if it is used in a writing lab without being part of a course.

The Comp-Lab Exercises can also be used as an ESL book for those non-native students who are making the transition from oral to written English although it was not designed with this purpose in mind. But the clarity of the explanations, the simplicity of the language, and the use of varied techniques--including some developed for ESL teaching--make it a multi-purpose program.

Susan Glassman
Writing/Reading Center Director
Southeastern Massachusetts Univ.

RECORD KEEPING AND SPECIFIC FEEDBACK: PREREQUISITES TO REALIZED POTENTIAL IN WRITING-LAB FUNCTION

All three of the universities where I have taught have had a writing lab of some description, with at least the partial intent of supplying a remedial facility for students with basic writing problems. Southern Illinois University had a "Writing Clinic," The University of Winnipeg a "Writing Lab," and Brigham Young University Hawaii an "English Skills Lab." Because of the special nature of the student body at BYU-Hawaii,

their writing lab is oriented much more towards ESL problems than to the more conventional reteaching function of a writing lab. The attempt to double the two functions has not been particularly successful, and in keeping with the intent and philosophy of the school, the English Skills Lab remains primarily a place for foreign students to gain needed elementary language abilities.

In contrast, at Southern Illinois the ESL program was completely separated from the English department, thus allowing the Writing Clinic to be directed towards a resource role in the school's extensive composition program. A full-time faculty member had overall responsibility for the function of the clinic. A small army of student assistants, including graduate students on teaching assistantships, provided manpower support. Files were established for each student who attended the clinic, with a report on the activity undertaken and an assessment of progress stated for each session of attendance. The students who were referred by instructors were expected to work for one hour each week of the term in the clinic, where they received individual attention in the area of deficiency stipulated by the instructor. At the end of each term, the clinic's files were given to the appropriate instructor in order for him to check on the student's work and progress as reported by the clinic, prior to the determining of the final grades for courses. This process often only supplemented otherwise apparent progress demonstrable through improved term work submitted by the student for the course itself, but in some marginal cases instructors considered the writing lab file as pivotal to the final grade determined.

At the University of Winnipeg no writing lab existed prior to the fall of 1977. Ninety-five percent of all enrollment in English courses was in the study of literature of some form, period, or ethnic or national background. The one section of composition offered, completely optional, was for those students who felt that their writing skills required upgrading.

Recently, a decision had been made to establish two separate composition courses, one to be designated basic composition and the other advanced composition, in recognition of a significant difference in motivation behind registration in the extant course. Some students, reasonably fluent writers,

were seeking that extra degree of proficiency which would refine their written work to a standard of excellence preparatory to admission to graduate school or other professional programs. Other students, of more modest capacity, the by-product of the genuine democratizing of university entrance in Canada over the past twenty years, sought the basic skill of being able to avoid failing grades on assigned essays. Partly in recognition of the needs of these latter students and partly because English is no longer a required course for all students, the administration of the university and the executive of the English Department determined the need for a writing lab of some sort to be established. Through the elimination of the English requirement, many second-language students could finally bypass what had probably been their most consistent stumbling block to unblemished transcripts and post-graduate fellowships. But the communications barrier still existed, and so, for a change, someone besides the English Department was talking about the need for improving students' writing skills.

The major problem, foreseen from the outset, was the limited facility available for student assistance. One set-aside classroom staffed by one in-charge, part-time faculty member assisted by three or four students of varying degrees of experience and expertise, had obvious limitations. The initial plan, therefore, was to run a trial writing lab for the first year, with the lab to be restricted in two main ways. First, during the trial run only those students referred to the lab from the English course would be accepted (until the lab could ascertain demand, see whether the present facility could handle the load, etc.). Second, the lab would run for about six weeks, from the middle of October to about the end of November. This would save money (fewer dollars for salaries) and also allow for a time lag between the beginning of term and the grading of initial sets of papers. In fact, the lab had been set up essentially to correspond with the likely demand from the basic composition class, although without any sense of being restricted to those students. Referral criteria were left to the discretion of individual instructors, but they were encouraged to describe specific areas for concentration of remedial work with students recommended. The student's response to referral was completely voluntary, with no mandated tie to grade and no established reporting system, although

teacher of the class in planning lessons and in recognizing problems. Because the sheet is easy to mark, it can be given to hundreds of students who have written a sample essay that is judged by an independent group of graders (usually three). Each essay is read and evaluated by two independent teachers. We have found that it takes little time to mark the evaluation sheet; students pick the sheets up at their leisure.

This division of writing competency into specified criteria is used as a general standard in the Writing Lab and in the Writing Competency Essay. Thus the two work together; a student can be assisted in developing skill in each criterion marked when the student takes the sheet to the Writing Lab or to the teacher of a composition course. A system of "points" is shown on this sheet in order to give the student some idea of the relative seriousness of errors in sentence structure, diction, and mechanics.

Both students and staff are happy to find a flexible program with clear criteria and definite goals. Too often good writing seems to be a formless mass of vague rules and indefinite precepts for the students. These clear diagnostic tools can be used by Writing Lab staff and by teachers in composition courses to provide a method for a step-by-step sequence that makes sense to the students. Each criterion can be mastered in turn; the student achieves a feeling of accomplishment with each success.

Finally, a program like this is beneficial for the entire curriculum. If the beginning course has definite standards and levels of accomplishment, then intermediate and advanced courses are able to delineate their standards more clearly. Students and faculty have a surer sense of what they are supposed to be doing while they can easily see what they are, in fact, accomplishing.

CRITERIA USED TO DETERMINE COMPETENCY IN WRITING

1. A central idea that is clearly stated or clearly implied and effectively restricted.
2. A relevant and logical progression of points supporting the central idea.
3. A systematic plan of organization that reveals a purposive arrangement of the parts.

4. Effective statements and transitional markers that identify main divisions of the theme.
5. Adequately developed paragraphs which include relevant and concrete examples, explanations, and other details.
6. Sentences which are clearly constructed, varied in form, and logically related.

<u>error</u>	<u>points deducted</u>
sentence fragments	3
sentence run-ons (run-together)	3
shifts in subject and verb	2
misplaced and dangling modifiers	2
comma series or pair not parallel	2
choppy construction	2

7. Words that are appropriate, precise, and economical.

<u>error</u>	
wrong word for the context	2
inappropriate mixing of stylistic levels	2
confusion between homonyms	2

8. Mechanics which conform to standard English.

<u>error</u>	
comma fault	3
fused sentence	3
failure to use apostrophe to show possession (also use of apos- trophe to show plural of noun or to show possession in a personal pronoun)	2
failure to set off nonrestrictive clauses, appositives, and other interrupting elements	2
failure to provide end punctuation	2
all misspelled words	2
errors in agreement	2
unclear pronoun reference	2

Charles Kovich
Northwest Missouri State Univ.
(previously Coordinator of the
Writing Program at the Univer-
sity of Northern Iowa)

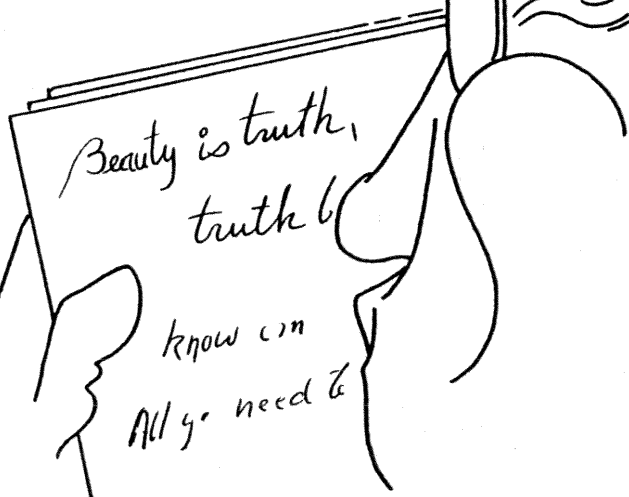
WRITING LAB FORMS INVITED

For the resource text Tutoring Writing (mentioned on page 1), we are collecting sample forms from existing labs which are used for evaluation, diagnosis, progress reports, record keeping, and so on. Anyone interested in submitting such forms is invited to send them, before Nov. 15, to Muriel Harris, Dept. of English, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN 47907.

GREAT MOMENTS
IN WRITING LAB HISTORY,
#3A



AND ALL I NEED TO KNOW,
MR. KEATS, IS THAT YOU'RE
ARGUING IN A CIRCLE.



WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER - Supplementary Mailing List #33

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