

WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER

Vol. V, No. 4 (December, 1980)

As the time approaches for your well-earned vacation, I wish you a leisurely, pleasant holiday and a good year ahead.

Despite those busy schedules, let's continue to keep in touch. Please keep sending your articles, reviews, notices, announcements, suggestions, names of new members, and \$3 donations (with checks made payable to me) to:



Muriel Harris, editor
WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER
Dept. of English
Purdue University
West Lafayette, IN 47907

Again, I wish you a peaceful, productive, joyous holiday and 1981!



AVOIDING FRICTION BETWEEN THE WRITING LAB AND THE COMPOSITION PROGRAM

As writing labs proliferate in response to increasing concern about students' ability to do college level work, we are finding that there is more to having a writing lab than simply bringing in tutors and students. We must also take into account the instructors for whom the students are preparing their papers. Since many--

perhaps most--of those papers are for Freshman English courses, it may be helpful to be aware of potential trouble spots in the relationship between the lab and the English department.

Careful planning and a great measure of good will are necessary on both sides to minimize friction, but the mutual benefits are well worth the effort. More important, the benefits to students are immeasurable when lab and department articulate smoothly, each reinforcing and complementing the other. Guidelines making clear how the lab will assist students in writing papers should be established at the outset. Working together, writing lab and department staffs can agree on what should be given priority in tutoring conferences, for example. It would be surprising, of course, to find total agreement as to priorities: there are too many ways of teaching writing, too many conceivable areas of emphasis. But there is no reason why tutors cannot be aware of the preferences (even eccentricities) of the instructors; and perhaps each instructor will agree to submit a set of grading criteria or statement of what he or she looks for in papers.

And there is surely some common ground. Few instructors are so idiosyncratic that they will not penalize an undeveloped, totally disorganized, or illogical paper, or one that is riddled with serious errors in grammar and mechanics.

Department and lab can also avoid misunderstandings if they agree in advance how instructors will treat papers prepared with the lab's help. Will they be graded in exactly the same



SEASON'S GREETINGS



way as those of students who get no help? Are students to be allowed to get help at every step of the writing process, or will they get assistance only after the instructor has seen the initial effort? Will instructors accept reasonable extensions on papers prepared with the lab's help (since students with writing difficulties often need several conferences to help them to revise)?

The department should also be aware that the lab cannot give effective help to the students if the tutors have no clear idea of what the assignments are. Instructors should routinely send copies of written assignments to the lab, and should be willing to answer questions for clarification, especially if their assignments are made only orally. (The lab can be a valuable source of information for instructors as to how assignments work out; by the way, we are all aware how much of student inadequacy in writing can be attributed to badly-designed assignments.)

Finally, let me suggest possible practices in the lab that might contribute to an unhappy relationship between department and lab. Instructors should be notified, for example, if it is the lab's policy to make students responsible for proofreading their own papers for mechanics and minor grammatical errors.

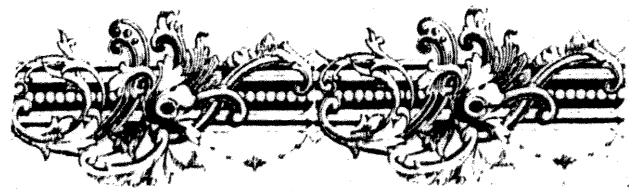
The close relationship that often develops between tutors and students is another potential source of misunderstanding. A tutor sees how hard the student has worked, and how much she has improved the paper in her revisions; he truly thinks the final product is pretty good. If the paper then comes back with a C- or a D, it is a temptation sometimes to agree with the student that the teacher is unfair.

It goes without saying that this is a temptation that must be resisted. Even if no other factors are operating (the student did not really fulfill the assignment, or the teacher is a stickler for perfect mechanics), taking sides with a student against an instructor can do no good, and could cause a great deal of mischief.

A conscientious and tactful writing lab staff will earn the respect and support of the department. Instructors who receive unacceptable papers from students who have been tutored will understand that there is a

chance that the student was lazy or willful, not simply badly advised. Efforts expended on both sides of the lab/department relationship will more than repay themselves in benefits to staffs and to students.

Peggy Broder
Writing Center
Cleveland State University



Schor, Sandra, and Judith Fishman.
The Random House Guide to Basic Writing.
Random House, 1978. (approximate price:
\$8.95)

An important resource for the teacher of Basic Writing, whether in the classroom or in the writing lab, is The Random House Guide to Basic Writing by Sandra Schor and Judith Fishman. The book is an asset because of its positive spirit, its clarity and good sense about the writing process, and the wealth of useful exercises offered.

A major strength of the book is its positive approach to students. The first chapter, "Writing Immediately," strives to reassure students that they have the necessary experiential and linguistic resources to write. Students are encouraged in the early chapters to tap into their experiences and to write about what matters to them.

Unlike many Basic Writing texts which distort or oversimplify the writing process to problem writers, The Random House Guide tells the truth about writing as process. Rather than encouraging students to think in terms of inflexible three-point outlines, the first two chapters open students to various methods for generating writing material. Chapter Two, "Getting Started," provides the beginning writer with various pre-writing techniques, ranging from free writing and the journal to brainstorming. But advice on outlining is offered as well, for those who would find it useful. Also, one chapter is devoted to revising as part of the writing process.

ETHICS AND GOOD TEACHING

The book abounds in clear and sensible material on sentence structure, including both elementary exercises and some sophisticated material. Chapters 6, 7, and 8 ("Finding the Verb and Subject," "Seeing Sentence Patterns," and "Making Connections" --the latter on subordination and coordination) are some of the best I have seen anywhere on explaining sentences to inexperienced writers. With sentence structure, RHG does not offer the arbitrary and generally useless definition that a sentence "makes a complete thought." Instead, students are encouraged to adopt a "working definition" of a sentence as having "two grammatical requirements: a subject and a verb" (p. 108). The discussion of fragments and comma splices/run-ons is especially good, with realistic examples, such as "We were glad to leave Kansas it was too hot," included. Several proofreading exercises for key punctuation-external problems are also offered.

The format of the book is also a strength. Schor and Fishman have used pictures and variations in type to emphasize key material and to prevent the student reader from feeling bored or insulted in using this text.

Two minor weaknesses I have experienced with the book are these. One is the book's focus on the essay form rather than on paragraphs, yet paragraph-length compositions are often a favorite in Basic Writing courses. Anyone tutoring students from such courses may find, as I have, the transition from the essay discussions in RHG to be arduous. The book supplies too little material on paragraphs, except as they exist in the context of essays. Two, I kept wishing for more exercises on comma usage. Both sentence external and sentence internal punctuation tend to be problems for Basic Writers. While the former is a definite strength of this text, I kept wanting more of the latter.

In sum, the book is a resource for a sensible approach to the teaching of Basic Writing, one which combines theory with practice and one which tells the truth. Despite some problems, I'd recommend it.

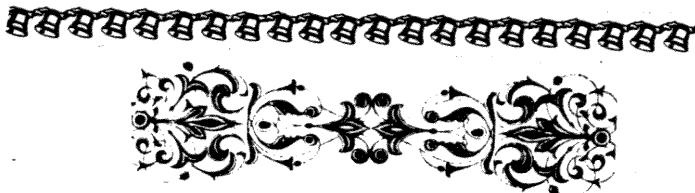
Regina Rinderer
Southern Illinois University
at Carbondale

People who staff writing labs have to develop resourcefulness and quick wit in order to foster learning in the varied situations we encounter while plying our trade. Sometimes, of course, we fail, whether because of preoccupation, fatigue, overloaded circuits, or what not--human limitations manifest themselves in more ways than one can name. But we can always improve our students' educational experience if we base our ad hoc decisions on sound pedagogy, keeping in mind that our main job is to help students understand their learning environment and thrive within it. It helps, of course, to have a procedure already established for handling circumstances that may arise unexpectedly. Here is such a procedure, evolved at the University of Akron Writing Lab, for working out an uncomfortable situation.

A student walks in angry at having received an F on a paper. The student throws the paper down in front of us and snaps disgustedly, "I didn't deserve that grade, did I?" The question invites us to do two things we can never do: estimate the grade a paper has earned, and take the student's side against the classroom teacher. And yet both are tempting, because we feel that students have the right to understand the reason for their grades and to know what is being asked of them--and if they don't, we may tend to feel the teacher has failed in that obligation.

But it is important to remember that in writing labs we don't know the context of any assignment unless we have been working with a student for a while, and very likely this disgruntled student is a relative stranger to the Writing Lab, one whose history is not known to us. Chances are that the teacher has explained the grading, and chances are the assignment was clearly stated. Chances are, indeed, that it is the student who has failed, in his obligation to know what is required. At least, the grade indicates that the teacher thinks so. With these considerations in mind, we can suspend the judgment the student is asking for and work to alleviate distress in more constructive ways. Four steps are helpful in reconciling an unhappy student with his condition.

First, in order to deal with the anger and frustration that brought the student to the Writing Lab, find out what s/he did in preparing the paper--perhaps s/he spent two or



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES
SUMMER INSTITUTE
IN WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

WHEN? June 29-July 31, 1981 (5 weeks)

WHERE? Beaver College
Glenside, PA
(Suburban Philadelphia)

COURSES: Each participant chooses (2)
•History and Teaching of Rhetoric and Linguistics
•Logic and Problem Solving
•Teaching Writing in the Humanities Disciplines

For All Participants

•Workshop in the Teaching of Writing

WHO CAN APPLY?

Prospective participants must apply in teams of three: two college or university instructors from the same institution--one in English, one in another humanities discipline and one instructor (in English, social studies, or foreign language) from a secondary institution in the same geographic areas as the college or university. Commitment for ongoing cooperation must be documented.

Each applicant must submit a proposal for a project to be completed during the institute period.

Anyone who has held an NEH fellowship or who has attended an NEH-sponsored institute or summer seminar in 1979-80 or after may not apply.

WHAT ARE THE FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS FOR SUCCESSFUL APPLICANTS?

NEH will provide a \$500.00 stipend for each participant and will pay most expenses for travel and room and board in the Beaver College dormitories. Commitment by administrator at home institution and some cost sharing are required.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION AND APPLICATIONS WRITE TO:

Professor Elaine P. Maimon
Director, NEH National Dissemination Program for Writing in the Humanities
Beaver College
Glenside, PA 19038

(215) 884-3500, Ext. 320

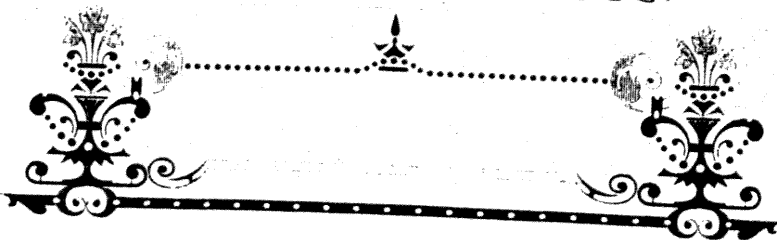
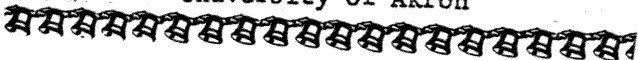
three times the usual amount of time thinking and writing and proofing, and expected to be rewarded for this effort with a good grade. Find out what the student's grades and writing problems have been up to this point. There is, of course, quite a difference between an F that follows a series of C's and an F that is the seventh in a row. But even if this is the seventh straight F, the student is feeling particular stress this time, which lends strength to your efforts to help him/her find success. So you first ask what the student's preparation was and what expectation was dashed by the teacher's response.

Second, find out what the teacher's expectation was: what were the requirements of this assignment? Sometimes while explaining this point, the student recognizes a shortcoming in fulfilling the assignment--or admits to not having understood what was asked for. Composition teachers may, especially toward the end of the semester, give complicated and very explicit writing tasks. Third, if the matter cannot be clarified in your session, suggest that the student confer with the classroom teacher. In fact, it is a good idea to suggest a conference any time students feel alienated from their teachers, just to open up communication again so the student can learn.

Finally, set up an appointment for after the conference, a session during which you follow up on what the teacher wanted, helping the student adjust his/her view of the writing tasks to bring it into better alignment with the classroom teacher's expectations.

By following the steps outlined above, you can turn a painful and frustrating experience into one which helps the student writer learn and grow and gain skills, not just of "writing," but of comprehending a writing task, planning how to accomplish it, and persevering until the requirements of an assignment have been met.

Mary King
Coordinator, the Writing Lab
University of Akron





HOW GEORGIA TECH'S LAB PREPARES STUDENTS FOR THE GEORGIA MANDATED PROFICIENCY EXAMINATION

Passing Georgia's mandated proficiency English examination is a graduation requirement for all students in Georgia's state supported colleges; therefore, it is a serious matter for students, English departments, and administrators. Every quarter some students are denied graduation because they have not passed the examination. Since each college's failure rate, which is surprisingly high for all schools, is published, much pressure falls on English departments to prepare students for the examination. As is often the case, the burden has fallen upon the lab. Through a variety of services and schemes our lab has succeeded in one quarter in reducing Georgia Tech's failure rate on the exam from 34% to 26%. These services fall into two main areas: (1) individualized, personal assistance in the lab and (2) a workshop.

Since classroom teachers come and go and since all are not well informed about the examination, the lab serves as a stable source to initiate both faculty and students to the examination by means of an updated file, past examination topics, grading criteria, samples of passing and failing examination papers, and a copy of the examination itself. Students who come to the lab go through the file and then write a trial examination, which is graded in their presence by a lab instructor. If a student passes, he feels ready for the exam; but if he fails, the lab instructor diagnoses the problem(s) and offers in-depth individualized help in the area(s) of the student's weakness. This instruction is applied, practical, and pragmatic, dealing with both rhetoric and grammar as they apply to the examination. Students who have previously failed the examination bring their examination papers for diagnosis and remedy. After diagnosis, students write practice essays and work on their areas of weakness until they and the lab instructor feel confident that they can pass. Time students spend in the lab varies according to their degree of proficiency. Though English teachers may strongly urge students to use the lab, students come of their own volition. The figures for the Spring quarter, 1979, are typical of the sort of improvement the lab makes on student performance. The lab sees relatively few first-time takers, but of those who did come by the lab, 90% passed the exam (as compared to 70.85% for all Tech first-timers.) Students who have already failed

it several times are the most frequent users of the lab. Work in the lab serves to raise the passing rate for these students about 4.5% above Tech average for all repeaters.

In addition to this personalized, individual help, the lab conducts a ninety-minute workshop the week before the examination to give students a crash course in how to pass the examination. This workshop is a highly visible and widely acclaimed method of preparing students for the examination. Administrators have publicly praised it; the English department faculty look upon it as a painless (to them) relief to the problem; and the lab feels rewarded because of increased staffing, dramatic reduction in the failure rate, and enthusiastic student response. After the examination, many students come by the lab to express their gratitude for help given in the workshop.

The workshop complements the lab's individualized instruction, which is necessary for slower students. It dramatizes and synchronizes what students know, indicating how they can profitably apply their knowledge and skills to the examination. It focuses on readily solvable problems such as lack of motivation, lack of awareness of grading standards for the examination, and inability to apply writing skills to the examination.

As the students have become aware of the dire effects of failing, the problem of motivation has lessened. However, there are still a few students who resent having to take the examination and so are lackadaisical about it or write belligerent quips instead of an essay. Especially in the examination's initial years, motivation was a problem. Since the examination costs the student nothing and formerly could be retaken without penalty, many students, even those who failed it, did not approach it with concern. New regulations now penalize a failure. Students with more than a certain number of credit hours must enroll in a special remedial course if they fail the exam. The workshop explains the penalties for failure and stresses the necessity of taking the examination seriously. It approaches the examination positively, motivating students to try to do well and to believe they can pass.

An understanding of grading process and criteria reinforces this motivation.

Research revealed that many students failed the examination because they did not know what was expected of them. By means of visual aids, workshop leaders show and explain criteria used by scorers of the examination. Then the holistic grading method used by scorers of the examination is explained, enabling students to appreciate the need for an organizational pattern, a thesis statement, and full paragraph development. After the explanation, a series of passing and failing examination essays on the same topic are flashed on the screen to let students distinguish good essays from bad ones. In this exercise, students see how to handle their material, and they gain confidence because they know how the graders proceed.

The next problem the workshop attacks does not sound formidable, but it is. Studies have shown that some types of topics inherently lead to failure, while others have a much higher passing rate. Since students have a choice between two topics on the examination, their ability to choose the "right" topic is important. Through discussion of former examination topics, characteristics of manageable, feasible, orderly topics emerge in contrast with those topics which have a split focus, abstractions, ambiguous quotations, and other pitfalls. Students see that some topics are inherently easier to limit, organize, and develop than others. Then they practice discerning the manageable as opposed to the unmanageable topics until they feel they can trust their discretion. Next the workshop provides techniques for generating evidence. Students participate in a simple role-playing exercise in which they create an imaginary reader who disagrees with their thesis. They consider his objections, and answer them in the essay. The workshop leader then reviews the basic organizational patterns and lets students suggest which pattern they would apply to selected topics.

To conclude the workshop, students write a first paragraph to a topic they select from two possible topics. After seven minutes, the leader stops the students, points out the difference in difficulty between the topics, offers guidelines to use in examining the paragraphs: Is there a thesis? Is it stated as a simple or complex declarative sentence, etc.? Students then write a one-sentence statement of what they meant to say. They swap their paper with the person next to them, who reads the paragraph and then writes in one sentence what the paragraph says. He returns the paper to the author who sees if the

reader got from the paragraph what the writer meant for him to get. After this exchange to test the effectiveness of communication, the formal workshop ends, but the leaders remain to answer questions and check paragraphs of students with questions.

The workshop has proven to be an economical, effective way to handle over two hundred students at a time. Students gain confidence and experience, and the lab gains prestige and satisfaction in performing effectively a needed service. The lab has met a need remarkably and commendably, has both initiated students to the test and prepared them for it. It serves all levels of achievers--remedial, average, and advanced. Results have more than compensated for expended time and money. Over the past several quarters, students who attended this 90-minute workshop have exactly a 10% higher passing rate on the examination than the overall passing rate for Georgia Tech.

Helen Naugle
Georgia Institute of Technology



A

READER

ASKS...

Our main problem with the Writing Clinic is that students who are told to use the clinic just do not come. We are now starting our second year, and "business" has picked up a little, but I would like to know if other labs have encountered this problem and what they are able to do about it.

Carol Roper
Writing Program Coordinator
Dutchess Community College
Pendell Road
Poughkeepsie, NY 12601



A

READER

COMMENTS...

In addition to the ideas in the WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER, I appreciate just knowing there are others out there fighting the same problems--and occasionally winning!

Mary Alice Hartman
University of Central Florida



THE RITES OF WRITING

Our Writing Lab has always been ready to assist with whatever writing walked through our door--book reports, poems, application letters, yarns of yesteryear, dissertations. So it was only natural when Newsweek and other doomsayers began to cry gloom that we decided to protest with our first Rites of Writing--a two-day symposium--even gave it the subtitle "Johnny, You Can Write--and Here's How!"

But we wanted to provide more than just an answer to the headlines. We wanted to proclaim the universality of writing, to remind the campus that writing was something all disciplines had in common. So we invited outstanding writers to share their knowledge, and their love of writing, and their ways of writing.

Further, to reinforce the fact that this was an all-university concern, we stationed the scientific writer in the College of Natural Resources, the art critic in the Fine Arts Center, the professor of writing in the College of Professional Studies, the editor in the College of Letters and Science, and so on. Thus, instead of bemoaning our fate, we tried to do something about writing attitudes and writing abilities--and to do it together.

We've had four more conferences since then. We've changed the format a bit each year; brought different guests each year; even varied the mix (added a sports writer this year)--but we've kept the same philosophy. And every spring for two days our campus at Stevens Point, Wisconsin, becomes a one-room schoolhouse as hundreds of gradeschoolers, high-schoolers, community writers, teachers, students, people from everywhere gather to talk about writing. No charge, no registration, just an interest in writing. This year over 2200 came to the 24 sessions for an exciting and happy time. A time to start, to renew, to reinforce.

All this sounds idyllic and successful--and it is. But it is not a simple operation. Let me share some of the housekeeping details:

Money. Each fall I go, cup in hand, to gather funds from the deans, the chancellor, the vice chancellor, etc., etc. There's nothing quite as effective as having money in a project to make certain that people get involved. Moreover, the broad-based funding is a reflection of all-university support.

Logistics. Right-sized rooms, back-up rooms, acoustics, TV lights--these are minor

problems but ever-present, as are all the promotional aspects, guest escorts, carriers for handouts and equipment, introducers. Then there's the freak blizzard. . . .

Emergencies. Getting the participants here. Now this is what transforms you into what someone in the Lab labeled a veteran of catastrophes. This year Myra Cohn Livingston was in an auto accident in Dallas one week before the Rites--and we had to search for a replacement. We were very fortunate. Ms. Livingston herself called writer friends and talked Phillip Lopate into coming. Three years ago Gerry McNeely of the Mary Tyler Moore Studios was to be on the program. We capitalized on the showing of "Something for Joey," which McNeely had written. So what happened? McNeely came down with mononucleosis and we had to come up with a healthy guest.

Reactions. What to do about pleasing people. You invite the best writers you know (and can afford). Yet for the same sessions by a poet one evaluation card will read

"If you like talking about the guts of a poem, this session was great. I don't." and another card will rave

"I grew to love her; images as fresh as this first true day of spring. Easy to relate to--what a surprise. Come again and give us all the opportunity to be and become through the written word."

For a session by an art critic, you get the guarded response

"He opened doors for me. However, the room he showed me was fog-filled."

Another will complain

"A speaker should not begin with 'I'm still sleepy and won't get breakfast until after this section.'"

while still another will proclaim

"Good, excellent, give that man a raise!"

Even so, it's all worth it. Besides, so far we have avoided what Harvard, it is told, faced some years ago. Carl Sandburg had been invited to speak to the student body. He staggered out on the stage, looked over the audience, and asked, "How many of you want to be writers?" As hands went up, Sandburg added, "Why the hell aren't you home writing?" and walked off the stage.

Seriously, a writing conference is a great idea. Try one. Let us help if we can. Please write for details--programs, list of participants, whatever.

Mary K. Croft
Director, Writing Laboratory
University of Wisconsin-
Stevens Point
Stevens Point, WI 54481

The English Department of Montgomery College is currently reviewing the effectiveness of its placement testing program. We are gathering information about types of tests, requirements, and follow-up studies at other institutions. We'd appreciate any information you can share with us.

Thank you for your help.

1. Name of Institution _____
2. Does your school have an open admissions policy? _____ Yes _____ No
3. Does your institution have an English writing placement test? _____ Yes _____ No
If no, thank you for your participation.
4. Name of Placement Test used? _____
5. Is your testing instrument _____ an objective test?
_____ a writing sample test?
_____ a combination of objective test questions
and a writing sample?
6. Are all students required to take the placement test before taking their first English course? _____ Yes _____ No
7. If placement testing is required, are your students required to enroll in the courses recommended as a result of their placement scores? _____ Yes _____ No
8. Who administers the placement tests? _____ English Department faculty
_____ Counselling
_____ Testing Center personnel
_____ Other (please indicate office)

9. If you use the Descriptive Tests of Language Skills (DTLS), what are the cutoff scores for developmental/remedial courses?
_____ Reading
_____ Sentence Structure
_____ Usage
_____ Other (please identify) _____
10. Has your institution done follow-up studies based upon the relationship of test scores, course recommendations, and course results?
_____ Yes _____ No (If yes, we'd appreciate receiving a copy of your findings.)
11. Other comments:
12. Do you wish to receive a report of our findings from this survey? _____ Yes _____ No

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