

# WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER

Member of the NWCA:NCTE Assembly  
Information Exchange Agreement

Vol. IX, No. 8 (April, 1985)

What topics do you want to read about in future issues of the newsletter? Several members of our group have recently commented that they'd like to share information about their writing labs with the rest of us but don't know what aspects of the lab would be of interest to others. This good question deserves an answer. What topics haven't been treated or haven't been adequately addressed? If you have a suggestion or two, please complete the following sentence in twenty-five words or more: Topics I'd like to see discussed in the newsletter include...

Along with your suggestions, please keep sending your articles, reviews, queries, comments, announcements, names of new members, and donations of \$5/year (in checks made payable to Purdue University and sent to me) to:

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

P.S. If you have an announcement that you'd like included in the June newsletter, the last issue of this academic year, please send it in by May 1.

1984 WRITING LAB DIRECTORY  
(Third Printing!)

The 1984 Writing Lab Directory is a compilation of two-page questionnaires completed by writing lab directors. The questionnaire answers describe each lab's instructional staff, student population, types of instruction and materials, special programs, use of computers, and facilities.

Copies are obtainable for \$13.50 each,

including postage. Prepaid orders only. Please make all checks payable to Purdue University and send them to Muriel Harris, Department of English, Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana 47907.

## SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL: A PLAN FOR THE DECENTRALIZED WRITING CENTER

Because many of us direct writing centers or are involved in their operation, we probably have particularly vivid images of what we would like the writing center of the future to look like. One image that comes to mind is of a large, spacious center stocked with books, carrels, computers and word processors. People in the room are busy, but the noise level is not too high because the floors are carpeted and the walls are covered with pictures and wall hangings. Tutors work efficiently, having been through an intensive training process, are friendly, and offer coffee to the students who have dropped in for help. Everything seems to be running smoothly. The room, like many professional offices gives off the air of being both professional and warm. The director sits back, anxious for the next student to pop in, sighs with satisfaction and notes the similarities between this facility and the Epcot Center at Disneyworld. Both are models of efficiency and technology. The writing center has come of age, it is respectable, and it is an integral facet of the academic community.

Writing centers over the past ten years have gained in respectability, and the time has come to look at the directions in which writing centers are headed. We need to examine our vision of the future and to consider some of the less obvious effects of the large center I described above. Even though my description of the writing center of tomorrow is perhaps overstated, we need

to recognize our predilection for centralization, for large organizations and for structures that contribute to a sense of isolation and alienation. Specifically, we need to think about what large centers suggest to students and to the academic community at large.

E. F. Schumacher in Small Is Beautiful points out that "for every activity there is an appropriate scale, and the more active and intimate the activity, the smaller the number of people that can take part, the greater is the number of such relationship arrangements that need to be established."<sup>1</sup> That is precisely why most writing center directors argue for tutors who can work with students on a one-to-one basis. Writing is an intimate activity, and we all know that one cannot teach writing by lecturing to students. And I would argue, because writing is an intimate activity, we need also think about the setting and overriding structures in which those relationships between tutors and students are developed. Just as Marcuse, in One-Dimensional Man, suggests that ideology is in the process of production itself,<sup>2</sup> I would suggest that the way in which our centers are designed--physically and socially--imply an ideology or set of attitudes of which we may not be aware. Students do not develop a relationship only with a tutor but with a whole writing center, and often this second relationship is ignored. Thus, while a student may hear one set of messages from an individual tutor, she may also receive a conflicting set because of the very structure of the writing center itself.

Students very often do not see the writing center as in any way connected to what they perceive as the real problems in their lives, to the academic community, to the curriculum they take or to the larger community in which they live. Establishing large, "professional" writing centers raises the chances that students will see the centers only as bureaucracy, and they will not perceive a connection between the writing they do in the writing center and anything else other than the courses they are trying to pass. When one perceives an organization, such as a writing center, as service-oriented, one is not likely to see that service as anything other than the solution to an immediate problem. Analogously, if I need a new muffler I take my car to a specialized muffler shop, but although I may be friendly with the repairman who does the job for me, I am still relieved to get the job done, to get out of the shop and to get on to

other things. And this is not a problem for muffler shops because muffler repair is not what Schumacher would call an intimate activity. Muffler repair is something that allows me to do something that is intimate, but it is not intimate in itself. Similarly, a large writing center on a large campus is removed from where a student lives, becomes in the student's perceptions one more bureaucratic office, and does not suggest that writing is an activity that allows us to do anything other than to get on with the important work that faces us.

A little more than ten years ago the federal government began earnestly helping people build large regional high schools designed to serve several small towns. The advantages of this move were that many facilities, supplies and equipment were made available to students who might not have otherwise had access to them. But the overall process of education--one of the most intimate processes of all--is removed from the context in which students live. These high schools increase levels of anonymity and just about insure that students will see the school they attend only as an institution they are required to attend and as another branch of the "system." In other words, we have guaranteed that our schools fit into what the sociologist Tonnies has called Gesellschaft. According to Tonnies, Gesellschaft is a mode of human relations typical of the modern age. It is "association that is no longer cast in the mold of either kinship or friendship," and it is a mode in which "all activities are restricted to a definite end and definite means of attaining it."<sup>3</sup>

I would suggest that large writing centers on large campuses (those with more than several thousand students) may reinforce these ideas and imply to students that writing is only a means to an end. As Schumacher has pointed out, certain "things can only be taught in a very intimate circle,"<sup>4</sup> and writing is one of those things. Many of our writing centers may suggest, implicitly, that writing is a tool one must learn to use in order to communicate what one has already mastered. We know, however, that writing is far more than a tool for communication. It is also an effective way of learning. The very process of writing about our world is, as Kenneth Burke once suggested, the developing of a strategy for dealing with a situation, and by developing the strategy we come closer to knowing the world we describe. The quotations Donald Murray has collected for the

final pages of A Writer Teaches Writing reinforce the notion that writing is more than communication; it is also a way of working, a way of knowing, a way of learning and a mode of discovery. It is, in short, a complex activity that helps us establish a relationship with the world.

Moreover, we also need to be aware that writing is a social activity. When we sit down to write, we stretch beyond our individuality and bring into the social realm our own thoughts, feelings and ideas. Even in those moments when we sit by ourselves in front of a blank piece of paper, we are not alone; we sit there and we write because at some level we are aware that we are social beings and we want to make contact with others. And, because writing is at once intimate and social--that is, personal and threatening all at the same time--we need to insure that the structures and organizations of our writing centers respond appropriately. Not only must our tutors be warm, helpful and human, but our centers--which imply by their very existence a larger social realm--must be as intimate as possible.

In order to promote writing in the manner I have just described we need to move in three directions. First, we need to concentrate on small centers; second, we need to be sure that the locations of our centers connect in some way to students' experience; and third, we need to initiate writing-across-the-curriculum programs that grow out of the needs of individual parts of the university.

One alternative is to begin by moving writing centers from classroom buildings into dormitories. Students in their first two years of school identify strongly with where they live, and it makes sense to put the writing center in the area with which they identify most strongly. Moreover, a writing center in a dorm can be small. The writing center I direct is small--we have five peer tutors who work five hours each per week--and in a residence hall. Our size helps us in a number of obvious ways--students establish good rapport with tutors, we do not have mounds of paperwork and the five tutors who work together each year develop a good support network among themselves. Because we are small we have a prime location: our two rooms--all that we really need in terms of space--are in the same building that provides living space for two hundred students, holds several classrooms, a divisional library and faculty offices for those who teach in the division. Most of the

students who make use of the center are the freshmen and sophomores who live on the upper two floors of our building, and they find it easy to drop in for help. They do not need to worry about walking alone across campus after dark, and they are free to come in more than once during an evening. This gives our tutors the opportunity to help students for a brief time, send them away with a specific task, and still see them later in the same evening. We have found that when tutors do this they take pressure off themselves and students alike; neither feels as though every problem must be solved in one session. In addition, this procedure suggests to students that writing is a process, not a magical act for which there is one correct formula.

Beyond the freshman and sophomore years students live in a variety of settings and probably see as their home base in the university the major department or division in which they put most of their attention. A center based in a department meets the criterion of being small and also of being connected to the central experience of the students. It is furthermore a shift toward a writing-across-the-curriculum program. Consequently, I recommend that we create a series of decentralized writing centers designed to serve various academic divisions and programs. Moreover, these centers should be administered by the programs of which they are a part. Thus, all departments could use writing centers to reinforce the notion that writing is integral to the student's learning experience. As the Director of a writing center that serves only one division of a university I would like to talk briefly about some of the advantages of such an arrangement.

One of the tremendous advantages of small centers is that they do not require full time directors. Because the directors can also teach courses in content areas, they can tie the curriculum more closely to the writing instruction that takes place in the center. My job as director of the Writing Center where I work accounts for one-third of my job. The other two thirds of my time I am a teaching member in the faculty, primarily in the humanities, but also occasionally in the social sciences. I consider the teaching side of my job an enormous asset to my role as Writing Center Director. Because I teach I have access to students in several different ways, and they understand very quickly that there is a practical connection between the writing in the course and the help they receive from tutors. In addition, they sense on an ab-

stract level that writing is a truly integral part of the curriculum. The writing center in our program is an extension of what goes on in the classroom, not an addition for a segment of our students.

If writing centers are established in this fashion, they would not be imposed on either faculty or students through some centrally administered committee but would grow out of specific needs of specific areas. This would help imply to students that writing is a real commitment of the department in which they are majoring and doing most of their course work and not just a commitment of the larger university. Students would see writing as an integral part of their experience, not only as a hurdle to be jumped.

A director who is a teaching member of a faculty also has direct access to other faculty members and this is as important as direct access to students. Such a director can help to redirect how writing is viewed by other faculty members through inservice workshops. These workshops can focus on the connection between techniques for teaching writing--assignments, grading techniques, and so forth--and the subject matter in various courses and thus guarantee that writing remains central to the learning process. This relationship between writing and content can be further enhanced through a mutual exchange of comments and suggestions among colleagues within a department. One of the opportunities I have to facilitate writing in all areas of our division comes when we discuss, each term, each other's syllabi. When we critique each other's courses, I have the chance to make comments and suggestions about various kinds of writing assignments, and I also get to see what all of our students are facing. This helps me direct the energy in the writing to certain areas.

A faculty member who directs a writing center, who trains tutors, and who is concerned with the teaching of writing can begin to establish quickly some of the primary needs of students in a particular area. She can then begin to develop, along with help from other faculty members, a coordinated writing program that deals with the needs of a particular segment of the university. If, for example, a history department wants their students to develop a broader range as writers, a director can suggest where in the curriculum it might be appropriate to assign expressive writing, and to help develop specific assignments for certain courses.

Such an approach to writing centers, one that focuses on size, location and connections to the curriculum, would put writing at the center of the learning process and would bring several advantages. First, through writing--an activity that is, as I have suggested, both intimate and social--students would learn more effectively about themselves and their relationship to the world. Secondly, if writing is a more integral part of course work, students would approach the material in their courses not as passive observers but as active participants and would thus learn a great deal more. Finally, I would suggest that writing centers such as these would contribute in their own small way to helping students perceive their college experience as whole and connected.



Geoffrey Chase  
Miami University

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Schumacher, E. F., Small is Beautiful (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 62.

<sup>2</sup>Marcuse, Herbert, One-Dimensional Man (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), pp. 10-11.

<sup>3</sup>Nisbet, Robert A., The Sociological Tradition (New York: Basic Books, 1967), p. 75.

<sup>4</sup>Schumacher, p. 62.



#### WRITING LABS AND LINGUISTIC INSECURITY

Working on a one-to-one basis, lab instructors can evaluate students' past instruction and learning styles, then use this information to effectively present skills the students need. Lab instructors can also use their special relationship to counteract bad attitudes about writing which prevent students from using skills they already have. However, instructors must be able to determine which skills are lacking because they were never learned and which because they are being suppressed.

Thanks to research focused on writing anxiety by John Daly and others during the past ten years, we know a great deal about how writing anxiety manifests itself and what some of its correlates are. My own research, funded in part by the National

Endowment for the Humanities, investigated the effects of writing anxiety on syntax and how writing anxiety correlates with age, sex, and socioeconomic factors. Though I will briefly summarize some of this research which is useful in diagnosing what I prefer to call "linguistic insecurity" (since it can be found in speech, hearing and reading, as well as writing), what I want to focus on here is how to help students help themselves to reduce their insecurity about writing.

When students do not write as well when they have an evaluative audience as they do in less stressful situations, traditional instruction such as grammar exercises, sentence combining, and imitation of sentences will not be especially useful. But unless tutors have samples of both kinds of writing from students, how are they to know that the problem is insecurity?

Sometimes tutors will sense students are insecure. Sometimes students will tell their tutors the thought of writing makes them panic. More often, however, the students and their tutors are not aware of their linguistic insecurity or how their linguistic insecurity affects their use of language.

I developed an indirect elicitation test for insecurity which takes about fifteen minutes to administer. The test and its theoretical explanation appears elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> but I will review its two parts here.

The first section is a list of nine words with two columns of blanks after them. The teacher reads two pronunciations of each word, labeling them "a" or "b." The two pronunciations pair the "standard" with either a hypercorrect or a dialect pronunciation, though not always in that order. The students put the letter of the pronunciation(s) they think they say in the first column and the letter of the pronunciation(s) they think is correct in the second column.

Great concern need not be taken for dialectically non-homogeneous groups. For instance, some insecure students whose dialects I know do not include "warsh" accurately mark that they say "wash," but decide "warsh" is correct, because they do not say it.

The second section pairs standard with hypercorrect, colloquial or non-standard versions of the sentences: the students check which they write to friends and which to teachers.

The test items indicate security if what a student marks that he or she says or

writes is also correct or among the correct possibilities. If the student decides that he or she says or writes choice a but that choice b is correct, that would be an instance of an insecure response. However, in the case in which the students indicate that they write or say more than one of the choices, for instance a and c, the item is marked as secure even if only one of these choices, for instance--c, is also considered correct. In these cases the students are probably recognizing that they can operate linguistically at several different levels of formality, at least one of which could be considered as being "correct."

If students have more than five items indicating insecurity, writing anxiety is probably contributing to their writing problems. My research indicates several problems which occur in students' syntax, for example, in a comparison of their essays and free-writing journals. As I mentioned before, traditional instruction is usually not the answer.

For instance, if students correctly use parallelism in journal writing but avoid it or use it incorrectly in essays, the teacher will not help them by presenting it in a formal, traditional way, as a new element of writing. A more useful tactic is to praise the parallelism in the journal writing, with a brief note about what created the pleasing effect. In this way, students learn one more thing about their "natural" use of language that is effective and useable in formal writing.

Instead, tutors must find ways of breaking through the insecurity to reach the students' competence. The lab is the ideal setting for this to occur, if tutors are aware of the students' special needs. First, the tutors must be aware of the affective factors of their interaction with the students. The key factor is for both the tutor and student to realize there is no one right answer, right sentence, right rhetorical development that the student is trying to reach. Rather than elaborate on this here, I refer you to Jay Jacoby's and Tilly Warnock's articles in The Proceedings of the Fifth Annual Writing Centers Association Conference (edited by Muriel Harris and Tracey Baker), the collection of conference papers presented at the Writing Centers Association Conference at Purdue University, in May 1983.

Secondly, students need to know the tutors well enough for the tutors to become authentic audiences for the writing. Rather than provide a large set of examples here, I refer you to the excellent case study Paula Bremer provided in her paper, also given at



Purdue. Paula began with her student Diane by establishing a point of common interest--track. This provided two advantages. First, a topic the student is interested in creates engagement which discourages self-monitoring during the initial composing process. Second, they had a subject to talk about, which created an opportunity for prewriting talking. As Diane was encouraged to discover what she had to say and how to communicate it so Paula could understand, Diane began to internalize her own sense of quality, what seemed right and what didn't, and Paula reinforced her in this exploration. Diane then had her "right answers" within herself; she had more trust in her own judgments, lessening her need to self-monitor by some outside norm during the writing process.

A third concern for tutors is determining the effect of the current classroom teachers on the students' attitude. If it is negative, it does not mean the teachers are mean or insensitive--only that they are perceived that way by students who feel inadequate to meet their writing tasks.

Like the lab tutors, the classroom teachers are not necessarily aware of the students' linguistic insecurity. When the teachers understand the problem, they can adapt many of the same techniques as lab tutors. In my paper in the conference proceedings is a response to a paper of an older, insecure male student by a classroom teacher which is a model of encouragement, challenge, and self-disclosure on the part of the teacher.

Peer interaction is another valuable asset in the lab for the linguistically insecure student. Peer tutoring is often less inhibiting than working with a professor. Not being alone but seeing others working on writing is often encouraging to the insecure writer, which is one reason I designed our lab with the majority of its space in an open room. Having the insecure student write to a friend who is working in the lab works well with students whose insecurity manifests itself in inappropriate verbiage (often the older male.)

Timed writing and revising which are very effective in overcoming writing blocks are excellent activities in the lab because the tutor can do oral pre-writing exercises with the student first. The tutor has a chance to observe the students write: blurred patterns, a common problem among insecure stu-

dents, often occur when students stop writing within a phrase or clause to consider how they are sounding. Are the students drawing their letters? This gives insecure students more time to self-monitor, so the tutor may want to work on the speed of handwriting. Also, when students stop writing because they are anxious, the tutor can have them verbalize their doubts and remedy them as they occur. For example, are the students stopped because they are unsure of a spelling? The tutor can tell them to spell it well enough that they will remember what they meant; then, when the first draft is done, the student can look up the correct spelling.

Sensitizing tutors to writing anxiety is crucial. Anxiety may manifest itself in the same way as other writing problems, but it requires very different interaction between the student and tutor if it is to be overcome.

Marcia Hurlow  
Asbury College

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<sup>1</sup>"Linguistic Insecurity and Syntactic Complexity," Clearinghouse on Reading and Communications Skills, Fall 1981.

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#### A READER RESPONDS . . .

The January 1985 issue of the WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER includes two insightful and helpful responses on the subject of learning disabled students. I would like to offer additional information and share the experiences of Norwich University which has a formal Learning Disabled Student Program.

First of all, I'd like to offer additional information about the nature and manifestations of specific learning disabilities.

Dyslexia is only one form of specific learning disability. A student may exhibit symptoms of this or other auditory-perceptual difficulties, or may show symptoms of a number of difficulties. These specific problems in processing language may

occur within a single learning system or through a combination of auditory, visual or motor systems. These problems may be manifested in learning behaviors at the perceptual, conceptual and/or expressive level, in quantitative thinking, in one or more of the various aspects of memory, in verbal and/or nonverbal skills, and in attentional behavior (Cordoni 4).

Assessment is a crucial component of the process of identifying and developing programs for learning disabled students. Oral and written language as well as auditory perception and memory must be considered. Psychological and/or medical evaluations are necessary for proper diagnosis of the specific disability. Learning disabled students often have problems with vocabulary, listening comprehension, reading comprehension, short-term auditory memory and notetaking. Thus, diagnosis of a student's specific disability is imperative in order to design an effective educational program (Vogel 522).

It is important to differentiate these students from those who have writing problems not related to specific learning disabilities. Students with little writing experience, students speaking a non-standard dialect and students who are skill-deficient or academically insecure might exhibit certain problems symptomatic of a learning disability (Cooney 47-9).

Barbara Sims, in her talk "The Dyslexic College Student," outlines the most frequent disturbances in writing function due to specific learning disabilities. disturbances are most frequently of three main types: a disorder in the visual-motor integration (a person may be able to spell orally, but cannot express ideas with visual symbols)--this is called DYSGRAPHIA; a deficit in revisualization (a person can recognize words and read, but cannot evoke a visual image from a spoken form so cannot write spontaneously or write from dictation); a deficiency in formulation and syntax (a person cannot organize thoughts into proper form for written communication, but can communicate orally, can copy, revisualize and spell). Sims' presentation draws from the work of Doris Johnson and Helmer Myklebust who have written extensively on the subject of learning disabled children (1-7).

Strategies for developing writing competence should be specifically tailored to the

particular disorder. One way to tell the true dysgraphic from a student with other learning disabilities is to ask her to copy a passage from a written text; the dysgraphic student can neither copy, write spontaneously nor write from dictation without error. Students with this disorder can speak an assignment into a tape recorder and then have it transcribed. This will help in discovering how well a student thinks and expresses herself instead of how well her visual-motor integration is working. Defects in revisualization will present similar manifestations, but the student will be able to copy correctly. In this case, a student will not be able to tell when something is incorrectly written and will most likely have spelling problems. Again, oral presentation of work to be transcribed will determine the linguistic competency of such students. Not penalizing such students for misspelling is another possible approach. Disorders in formulation and syntax will also present a discrepancy between oral and written work that will be characterized by a use of concrete language and limited output. Sentences will most likely be short and choppy and information limited in scope. Combining exercises might be helpful in these cases (Cordoni 6).

There are no "pat" answers for dealing with these disorders in our labs and classrooms. The helpful suggestions of Lauby and Scanlon in the January WLN are a good place to start. Accepted practices that we follow in our LD program at Norwich include the following:

- overlearning concepts
- tracing words on rough surfaces to improve handwriting and spelling
- repetition (dysgraphic students often spell names and other familiar information correctly)
- ignoring spelling errors in order to concentrate on other areas of development
- referrals to readers and typists (in some cases these can be provided by Vocational Rehabilitation)
- oral and untimed exams
- personal counseling (to help students deal with frustration and emotional blocks that often accompany learning disabilities)
- academic counseling in time management and organizational strategies
- word processing
- support groups (gatherings of LD peers).

What remains the most important aspect is accurate and specific diagnosis of the disability. This will yield the recommendations of a qualified professional that should be followed in the design of an individualized writing program.

Research is ongoing in the field of educating the learning disabled, and more discoveries are being made. Thus, we by no means have the "final word" on diagnosis or developmental strategies that will help students. Many of us are finding ways to help them through a trial and error process; still, it is important to consult research (largely on the elementary and secondary level) in order to adapt our approaches to accepted practices. We also need to widen the dialogue about LD programs on the college level to prevent further misunderstanding of a complex issue and to help our students to maximize their learning potential.

If any readers would like further details about Norwich University's LD program procedures, I will be happy to share information via phone or mail correspondence.



Paula Gills, Assistant Director  
Learning Skills Center  
Norwich University  
Northfield, Vermont 05663  
(802) 485-5011 ext. 259

SOURCES

Cooney, James P. Jr. "A Classification of Remedial Writers." Teaching English in the Two Year College 6.1 (1979): 47-9.

Cordoni, Barbara. "What Psychology and Special Education Have to Share with Teachers of Writing." Annual Conference of Teaching of Technical Writing, Carbondale, Illinois, 20 Oct. 1978, 1-9.

Sims, Barbara. "The Dyslexic College Student." Annual Conference on College Composition and Communication, Anaheim, 4 Apr. 1974, 1-7.

Vogel, Susan A. "On Developing L.D. College Programs." Journal of Learning Disabilities 15 (1982): 518-28.

Three tenure-track positions; Instructor/Assistant Professor, dependent upon qualifications. September 1985. Must be excellent classroom teacher with experience in and demonstrated willingness to teach freshman composition as well as advanced courses. Preferred areas of concentration include: composition theory, teaching of English, linguistics, ESL, creative writing, technical writing/document design, writing centers. A combination of areas and practical as well as theoretical expertise preferred, rather than one area of experience. Ph.D. almost essential. Twelve hour teaching load. Send letters and documentation to Rev. Dr. Paul DeSante, Chairman, Department of English, Gannon University, Erie, PA 16541. Deadline April 30, 1985.

CALL FOR PROPOSALS

A one-day Basic Writing Conference, co-sponsored by NCTE and the Monsanto Fund, is planned for Saturday, September 21, 1985 at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. Proposals for papers, workshops, and panel discussions in Basic Writing should be sent by April 20, 1985 to Sallyanne H. Fitzgerald, Acting Assistant Director, Center for Academic Development, University of Missouri-St. Louis, St. Louis, Missouri 63121. Andrea Lunsford will give the major address, and concurrent session topics will include such areas as ESL, writing labs, computers, administration, tutors, and speaking/writing/reading.

The \$11 registration fee includes materials, refreshments, and lunch. Checks should be made payable to the University of Missouri-St. Louis and mailed to David Klostermann, Continuing Education-Extension, University of Missouri-St. Louis, 8001 Natural Bridge, St. Louis, MO 63121. Conference registrants requiring housing should make reservations directly with the Breckenridge King's Inn, 9600 Natural Bridge, St. Louis, Missouri 63121, (314) 427-7600 prior to September 7, 1985. Special Basic Writing Conference rates are \$35 single and \$40 double.



# TUTOR'S CORNER

## INDIVIDUALIZED INSTRUCTION

Incorporating individual style . . . an article on this subject could never be a prescription of what to do in a tutoring session, because "individual style" means that each person's approach will be different. In that difference lies the greatest appeal of tutoring--the chance to treat students' problems in ways best suited to them.

The most important thing about tutoring is the relationship between the tutor and the tutee. This should be a sincere, friendly, equitable relationship of mutual respect. For the best results in tutoring, I would make three main points: be yourself, let the student be him- or herself, and use the understanding the two of you develop to find the most effective tutoring methods.

Tutoring is an interaction between two individuals. It is not the normal teacher-student relationship, and you can thrive on this difference. You do not have to be an authority figure, and you do not have to dominate to be effective. Allow yourself the pleasure of behaving as if you are working with a friend. Do not hesitate to tell your tutee about yourself, your interests, and why you are a tutor. Your students will be interested. The curiosity they sometimes have about their professors' private lives contributes to the distance they may feel from them. But with tutoring, you are working to establish a personal relationship. Your students will feel more comfortable if they sense that you are a real student--and therefore an equal. To give you an example from my own experience, when I was working on a lengthy paper, I mentioned the project to one of my students. He was curious to hear how I was approaching the assignment, interested, even, to see some of my rough draft, complete with scratch-outs and arrows, and relieved, I think, to hear that I was experiencing some difficulties with it. In another instance, a female student asked me about boyfriends. I gave her a sketch of the current situation, and she was pleased to offer a few minutes' worth of advice. These brief exchanges may seem trivial--even unprofessional--but they are indications of a bond between tutees and tutors. By being yourself, and not playing a role of an

all-knowing, superhuman expert, you encourage the students' respect for your sincerity and establish a strong base from which to deal with writing problems.

A second vitally important feature of the tutoring relationship parallels the first: letting the student be him- or herself. For any valuable work to be accomplished, the tutee must feel comfortable, accepted, and liked. If they are peers, this feature is especially important. They appreciate being treated as peers, and not as intellectual inferiors. When you show interest in them as people, and not just as "the sentence-fragment case" or "the no-thesis-statement case," they will not only enjoy the tutoring session more, but they will be more eager to do well. Certainly the tutoring session should not become a deeply personal one; writing problems should remain the focus. But, if you can become friends with your students by responding to their feelings, concerns, and interests, you will get to know their strengths and weaknesses, enabling you to approach their writing problems in the most sympathetic way.

In order to sustain a good relationship, try to remember from one week to the next what the students you tutor are doing, how they've been feeling and academic and non-academic things you've discussed. Take their concerns and interests seriously; they'll appreciate it. You may also foster their self-confidence and a sense of self-integrity which may translate into academic confidence. Particularly if the student is feeling lonely or having trouble with his or her other peers, the tutoring session and your relationship can be one in which the student can feel respected and cared about. Treat your students as individuals, because that is what makes tutoring unique.

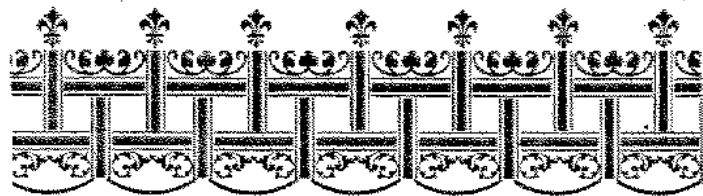
This emphasis on establishing a sincere and friendly relationship is not just to make the sessions more fun, though they will be, but to enable you to adapt to various student needs and personalities. As you create a forum for open expression of ideas, you can encourage your student to recognize his or her own weaknesses in writing. In this way, tutoring can become truly collaborative. By recognizing their concerns and then dealing with them, you assure your

students that you take them seriously and that you are consciously addressing their problems. Furthermore, by knowing their interests and personal style you can design approaches which will address their problems in an interesting and relevant way. For example, using current magazine ads to demonstrate organizational skills makes graphically clear to the student the effectiveness of carefully planned persuasive arguments, and inviting personal response to the ads gives their view credibility.

The tutoring session should always tap the resources of students' individuality and adapt to their personal needs. For example, the differences between student perceptions of a literary text should be pursued individually and not in reference to what another student has said. The tutoring session provides a student with a unique opportunity to explore his or her own ideas to their fullest extent. Or, on a more fundamental level, one student's comma splice errors may be a result of completely different grammatical weaknesses than another's. Being aware of these differences makes the solution of the problems more likely to happen.

Whatever the problems, remember that tutoring provides the best opportunity for students to solve them. The time you spend with them is theirs entirely. The concerns you express are uniquely theirs. The solutions you create are tailored to them. And the friendship you establish with your students will make this time not only academically, but also personally, rewarding.

Elizabeth Holmes  
Peer Tutor  
Miami University



#### CALL FOR MANUSCRIPTS

Short articles are being sought for a newsletter on the theory and use of syntax in teaching writing and thinking (K-college). Send inquiries or articles with a SASE to Edward Vavra, Syntax in the Schools, Shenandoah College, Winchester, VA 22601. Subscriptions (4 issues) are \$2.00.

#### PACIFIC COAST WRITING CENTERS ASSOCIATION FIRST REGIONAL CONFERENCE

The first conference of the Pacific Coast Writing Centers Association was held at the University of Southern California on February 9th, co-hosted by Irene Clark from USC and Thom Hawkins from the University of California at Berkeley. Despite some unexpected showers in the morning, the conference was a wonderful success; everyone had something of significance to say, there was a great deal of discussion, and everyone left with renewed enthusiasm and many interesting ideas.

The keynote speaker was Mike Rose, from UCLA who talked about "Writing Centers and Writing Blocks." Rose's entertaining and informative talk was concerned with how writing centers can work to dispell misconceptions about writing which can prevent students from fully exploring their ideas, often resulting in writing blocks. The afternoon speaker was W. Ross Winterrowd, whose talk "The Politics of Writing Centers," focused on the philosophy of writing centers as crucial to the advancement of literacy in our culture.

Concurrent sessions focused on the following topics: (1) the writing center and writing across the curriculum, (2) psychological concerns of writing centers, (3) components of tutoring, (4) training teachers and tutors, and (5) using computers.

The food was good, the conversation was lively, and we all look forward to another conference next year.

Irene Lurkis Clark  
University of Southern  
California

#### EVALUATING STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENT IN A WRITING CENTER

After a semester in our Writing Center at Iowa State University, our students reduced errors in grammar, punctuation, and spelling by more than one half and improved the quality of their writing enough to enable them to pass the second semester of freshman English. In our Writing Center program we tutor students just once a week, offering them a li-

mitted number of punctuation and grammatical principles taught through sentence combining. When we analyzed pre- and post-essays at the end of the semester, we found that our students' writing improved in quality but contained decidedly shorter clauses and T-units. In this report we will describe the program, explain the procedures for the evaluation, and present the results.

## DESCRIPTION OF THE PROGRAM

Students in our Writing Center have taken the first semester of a two-semester composition series, and failing to meet the guidelines for correctness that are established for the course, they have received "incompletes," which they must erase by work in the Center. Our department attempts to establish uniformity in grading across the 300 sections of the two freshman courses, English 104 and 105, that run each year. To this end, the course presents students a manual which outlines objectives and describes standards of material, organization, style, and correctness for compositions they will write. Errors designated "serious" and counted against their grade include run-on sentences, fragments, faulty agreement, shifts in construction or dangling modifiers, inconsistent tense, punctuation leading to misreading, apostrophe omissions, and misspellings. Although many of the students we see are weak in the larger areas of composition, we must concentrate on sentence structure and mechanics in order to help them meet this standard in the little time we have to work. Teaching a limited number of rules of punctuation through sentence combining allows us to correct common errors they are making and offer sentence varieties that they can use and feel secure in handling.

Our program schedules students in half-hour private tutorials or hour-long small group sessions meeting once a week. Tutors present a principle, and students practice creating the structure through sentence-combining exercises. The course is cumulative, beginning with a lesson on subject-verb recognition and proceeding to sessions on coordination, subordination, and relative clauses. We also teach apostrophe use and help students to design efficient proof-reading strategies.

## PROCEDURES FOR THE STUDY

For this evaluation we included 35 students enrolled in the Writing Center spring semester of 1982 whose problems were not due primarily to dialect or second language interference. Although we have

foreign and minority students working in the Center, we tailor the instruction to their needs, often working primarily on verb tenses and forms. For this study we wanted to test our recently completed sentence structure program, and tutors presented these exercises and assigned uniform paper topics to all students. Nine of the study's students who had scored below eighth grade on the Stanford Achievement Test of Spelling were given extra instruction in spelling, which required two additional hours a week.

For the pre-essay we chose the topic "Should colleges have the right to ban controversial speakers from the campus?" For the post-essay students wrote on the topic, "How do your perceptions of parents, school, friends, hobbies (choose one) differ now from those in your childhood?" Students had half an hour to write each essay and used no dictionary. In writing these essays students were aware that their performance would not influence their grade. We explained that the purpose of the pre-essay was diagnostic and the purpose of the post-essay was to gauge their progress. Students knew that a test of their success in the program would be a longer composition they would write at the end of the semester. Therefore, motivation was similar in both essay writing settings.

Two raters who read each essay were instructed to read the papers and place them in one of three categories: 1) capable of work in English 105, 2) needing a semester of Writing Center instruction, 3) probably needing more than one semester of Writing Center work. Each category was given two levels, allowing a six-point scale for a finer discrimination of ratings. Since we had previously used this scale in placing students into Writing Center programs, raters were accustomed to working with it.

Two more instruments were part of the evaluation. One was a 50-item objective test we have designed, which examines spelling, punctuation, and grammar principles we teach. The other was pre- and post-sentence combining exercises consisting of paragraphs that we have decombined. Students were given 20 minutes to rewrite the paragraphs.

## RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Essays. The pre-essay revealed that most of our students' writing is marred by multitudes of errors in spelling and punctuation, and these errors interfere drastically with the readability of their work. Writing an average of 237 words, students produced a mean of ten errors in their essays. Spelling

made up half of the errors; the others appearing most frequently were run-on's, fragments, apostrophes, commas between closely related parts (often subject and verb), and shifted constructions. When students wrote long sentences, they seemed to lose track of the beginnings and frequently produced what Mina Shaughnessy called "blurred patterns": "In many people's mind they feel controversial speakers can sway the college students ideas of what he or she feel is right." More frequent than using short, choppy sentences was the tendency to write long, awkward constructions: "When considering whether or not to ban controversial speakers, many questions arise such as, "What about freedom of speech?" and "What reactions of effects does controversial speakers at a college have on the students there?" Even less ambitious sentences were often repetitious and riddled with error: "College is a place to learn and controversy is something new that every one should get a taste of, banning a controversial speakers would, in a way get in the way of learning."

Only four of the students wrote short sentences. In general, as Shaughnessy noted, remedial students are not immature writers. They attempt most of the constructions of more skilled writers and use a variety of sentence openers, not relying on continuous subject-verb patterns. But the weaknesses lie in their inability to manipulate words and grammatical structures. While some of the flaws are syntactic lapses, many are redundancies and wordy phrases caused by students' inability to find words and word forms that could smooth out their sentences. As additional distractions to a reader, the spelling and punctuation errors not only interrupt the flow of the work, but inevitably reflect on the credibility of the writer.

The post-essays showed a remarkable drop in the number of errors.

Table 1

Pre- and Post-Essay Scores, Error Counts, and Word Counts with Significance Probabilities

	Pre	Post
Essay score	3.42 <sup>1</sup>	2.96** <sup>1</sup>
# of errors	10.2	4.1**
# of words	237.74	230.69 NS

<sup>1</sup>(1=high  
6=low

\*significant at better than .05  
\*\*significant at better than .01  
NS= not significant

Table 1 indicates that students wrote approximately the same number of words on the post-essay but reduced their errors by more than half. Grammar and punctuation errors dropped by half, and spelling errors dropped somewhat more. In addition, the quality of the essays improved. Improvement occurred in students of all abilities with one-third moving out of the level designated as "needing remedial help." A check on 18 students who have completed English 105 shows that only one received below a C grade. That student dropped out of the course. The teacher indicated his work had been satisfactory but he had found the course difficult.

Table 2

Clause, T-unit, and Sentence Length on Pre- and Post-Essays with Significance Probabilities

	Pre	Post
words/clause	9.7	7.63**
words/T-units	15.86	12.06**
words/sentence	18.84	15.01**
ratio clause/ T-unit	1.34	1.34 NS
ratio T-units/ sentence	1.19	1.27 NS

n-35

\*\*significant at better than .01

NS=not significant

Table 2 verifies what was evident from reading the pre-essays. Students were writing long sentences and clauses that they were unable to control. Clause and T-unit length on pre-essays were longer than most studies report for students in regular freshman classes. Checking on one section of English 105 students, we found that their first in-class expository papers produced shorter sentences and clauses than remedial students' papers, with T-units of 14.77, clauses of 9.49, and a mean sentence length of 17.5.

Two studies of freshman writers show similar figures for pre-essays. The Morenberg, Daiker, Kerek study at Miami University gives clause length of 8.75 and T-unit length of 15.31 for their experimental group.<sup>1</sup> Richard Haswell's study at Washington State gives clause length as 9.26 and T-units as 14.94.<sup>2</sup>

As expected, after instruction in sentence combining, students in the Morenberg and Haswell studies increased clause and T-unit length. On the other hand, our students showed a substantial drop in length. Comparison with Hunt's scale indicates that in the post-essay their T-unit length is comparable to just above the eighth grade level, and clause length is just below eighth grade figures.<sup>3</sup>

A close analysis shows what changes have occurred. Students are writing substantially more clauses, but shorter ones. Our program teaches them to write and punctuate adverbial clauses and relative clauses as well as to punctuate compound sentences. Adverbial clauses increased substantially (from a mean of 3.9 to 5.6). Students frequently chose adverbial clauses as sentence openers. In addition, the ratio of T-unit to sentence increased slightly. Students were using more compound sentences. Conjunctive adverbs are easily remembered, and students compounded sentences using semicolons with some ease. At the same time the ratio of clause to T-unit remained the same. While noun clauses remained approximately the same, adjective clauses beginning with *wh* (*who, which, where*) dropped from 1.23 to 1.14, which was not a statistically significant change. However, this drop occurred in a pilot study. Evidently students find the somewhat shifting rules for punctuating relative clauses difficult, and they are reluctant to use them. In short, students have learned what they have been taught and have used what they felt they could handle. The two-word drop in clause length and almost four-word drop in T-unit are exceedingly high. We attribute the pronounced decrease, in part, to the essay topics. Research has shown that syntax required of argument produces longer T-units than other rhetorical modes, and the topic on controversial speakers may have led students into somewhat longer structures. The pilot study using topics of worst and best teachers resulted in a drop of one-half word in clause length and two words in T-unit length. The two counts taken two years in succession, all showing reduced clause and T-unit length, are sound evidence of this trend.

Sentence-combining exercises. The second measure we took of T-unit length was on sentence combining exercises. Studies have shown that students' T-units are shorter in sentence combining exercises than in free writing, and our students produced T-units of about 12 on pre- and post-tests. However, our conclusions were that the paragraphs were too difficult for the students to comfortably manipulate. Even the post-test paragraphs contained more syntactic weaknesses than students' initial free writing. Both paragraphs required that students organize material into lists and maintain parallel structure, and students were unable to find word forms that produced smooth results.

Objective test. Finally, our students showed a gain of 2.59 on the 50-item objective test. Although this gain was statistically significant, their final score was 2.6 points below the initial score of students in regular sections. The lower score on tests of usage is borne out in a comparison of ACT English scores. Our students showed a mean of 15.9 compared to a mean of 21.6 for students in regular 105 classes.

#### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

E. D. Hirsch stresses readability as the major determinant of good writing. Shorter clauses lead to greater readability because they place less of the burden on the reader's short-term memory. Furthermore, he writes that "the main uncertainties of bad writing are small-scale, local uncertainties persisting from word to word, sentence to sentence."<sup>4</sup> It is just these obstructions in students' work that inevitably lead them to be sent to our Writing Center for an extra semester of intensive training. A questionnaire we have used for three years was adapted from one designed by Andrea Lunsford at Ohio State<sup>5</sup> and revealed information about these students similar to what Lunsford found. Three quarters of them have had composition courses in high school and been instructed in grammar and punctuation. One half have received an average grade of B in their high school English courses and do not come to us with a long history of failure. The errors are not as frequent or serious as the basic writing students of Mina Shaughnessy's program. But somehow our students have not acquired a facility to manipulate vocabulary or sentence structure in smooth or fluent ways. The result is wordy phrases and awkward constructions, especially pronounced when they deal with



less familiar material. After a semester's instruction in basic sentence structure, these students, using more adverbial dependent clauses and more compound sentences, produce writing that does not continuously interfere with a reader's progress. Although the clause and T-unit length is shortened, raters do not identify the writing as simplistic as shown by the generally higher ratings awarded their papers. Indeed, research by Faigley has shown that these measures account for as little as four percent of the quality of compositions recognized by readers.<sup>6</sup>

It would seem from this study that our students need to move back a level, to practice simpler routines until they gain control of techniques that will allow them to move on once again.

Carol David and Thomas Bubolz  
Iowa State University

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>See Max Morenberg, Donald Daiker, Andrew Kerek, "Sentence Combining at the College

Level: An Experimental Study," Research in the Teaching of English, 12 (Oct., 1978), 245-256.

<sup>2</sup>See Richard H. Haswell, "Within-Group Distribution of Syntactic Gain Through Practice in Sentence-Combining," Research in the Teaching of English, 15 (Feb., 1981), 87-96.

<sup>3</sup>Kellogg W. Hunt, Grammatical Structures Written at Three Grade Levels (Champaign, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1965).

<sup>4</sup>E. D. Hirsch, The Philosophy of Composition (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1977) p. 105.

<sup>5</sup>Andrea Abernethy Lunsford, "An Historical, Descriptive, and Evaluative Study of Remedial English in American Colleges and Universities," Ph.D. dissertation, The Ohio State University, 1977, pp. 154-159.

<sup>6</sup>Lester Faigley, "The Influence of Generative Rhetoric on the Syntactic Maturity and Writing Effectiveness of College Freshmen," Research in the Teaching of English, 13 (Oct., 1979), 197-206.

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

