

WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER

Vol. II, No. 8 (April, 1978)

Members of our newsletter group who gave papers at the 4 C's on writing labs or who directed sections of the Special Interest Session on labs have kindly offered to send to the newsletter summaries of what was presented at their sessions. These reports will be included in the next issue of the newsletter or as soon as space permits. Other members of our group who attended 4 C's sessions on subjects of interest to the rest of us are also invited to send in their reports and observations. For those of us who were unable to attend the conference or were attending other sessions, this should be a useful way to communicate to each other.

Please send your article and names of new members, plus donations of \$2 to help defray our rapidly rising costs of mailing and duplicating (with checks made payable to me), to:

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47907

Eight Suggestions to Attract More Students to Labs

Based on my experience as a director of three writing labs and an instructor at a fourth at four different kinds of institutions (a community college, a two year branch of a state university, a state university, and now a four year liberal arts college), I have some observations about methods that fledgling (and established) labs might employ in order to prevent having the lab become stigmatized as a place where only "remedial" or "bonehead" students go. Having the lab serve all students rather than operate as solely a remedial center has sev-

eral advantages; it makes the "remedial" students feel better about working there, that it is not somehow a dishonor or an admission of intellectual inadequacy; it elevates the importance and regard for the lab held by the entire college community--students, faculty, and administrators; it increases student use of the lab, thereby making financial and staffing requests more justifiable in the eyes of administrators; and it provides a central location for materials and services which on many campuses are not available at all or are spread out and difficult for students to locate.

I have found several methods helpful for getting a diverse group of students to come to the lab and use its facilities: (1) provide several typewriters for general student use, so any student can come to the lab to type a paper, (2) provide books on research paper form, typing form, grammar, etc. so a student writing or typing a paper can readily consult them, (3) provide basic reference materials which students writing or typing a paper might want to consult: an unabridged dictionary, a single volume encyclopedia (the Columbia, for example), a thesaurus, etc., (4) provide sample copies and workbooks dealing with graduate school admissions tests such as GRE, LSAT, MCAT, etc. and give workshops on how to take such tests, (5) sponsor an essay contest annually with a specified topic and in some case prizes (even if they are modest), (6) offer a lecture service to other faculty wherein lab personnel will lecture to their classes on how to take an essay test, how to write a term paper, or any particular writing problem desired (and announce at the lecture the lab's willingness to help with such tasks), (7) send letter annually to all students listing all of the services offered by the lab, (8) provide a referral service so that an instructor can refer any student he wishes or a student may refer himself/herself to come to the lab for assistance with any writing project.

The lab must make sure that it does not appear, or in fact become, a paper writing or proofreading service, but it can be made clear that the lab will offer assistance with organizing and planning a paper and with putting it in proper grammatical and mechanical form. The techniques listed have helped considerably here at Wheeling College to get increased student use of the lab and to prevent it from being regarded as a service for "remedial" students only.

R. Stanley Dicks
Wheeling College



Finding the Key Idea in Topic Sentences

Like the Writing Clinic at St. Cloud University ("An Approach to Organization," WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER, Dec., 1977), Purdue University's Writing Lab also uses a "how, why, what approach" in helping students develop topic ideas and topic sentences from thesis statements. However, prior to using this approach, we also emphasize the significance of each topic sentence's "key idea(s)."¹

As explained to the student, since the topic sentence states the main idea of the paragraph in very specific terms, it also usually includes some key words which serve as the focus of the paragraph. Hence, in the topic sentence (used as a model) "I decided to attend Purdue University for three reasons," the key terms three reasons indicate what ideas the paragraph will develop. Likewise, in the sentence "My grandparents' home was a frightening place to visit, full of traps and haunts," we can expect that the element of fear will be developed through the key ideas of traps and haunts.

Thus, our approach progresses from (1) the thesis statement to (2) the key ideas to (3) topic sentences/ideas. The value of using this

intermediate step of key ideas proves itself in two ways. First, in examining several model topic sentences, the students practice identifying the key words in each sentence. This identification brings home to the students the universality of key ideas in topic sentences since each sentence does have a key word(s) which suggests what the focus of the paragraph will be. The practice also helps them internalize the necessity of such key ideas.

Second, and more important, through using this intermediate step, the student can check his own topic sentences for key ideas. Simply put, if none exists, the student may anticipate difficulty focusing his paragraph. For example, in responding to the thesis statement, "Foreign travel is good for Americans," one student devised a topic sentence that read, "Foreign travel is good for Americans because they see the world." When asked to identify the key idea in the sentence, however, the student couldn't. He then set to work asking why it was good for Americans to see the world (which is essentially a re-statement of the thesis). His revised sentence, "Foreign travel is good for Americans because through it, they learn a lot," contains a key idea he could easily identify and develop: learn a lot. The absence of such an idea, then, signals the student even before he begins development of the paragraph.

Finally, in addition to using a combined "key idea" and "how, why, what" approach in individualized instruction, we also have offered two mini-courses on development of topic sentences. In these mini-courses, we use a specially designed packet which incorporates both these concepts. After reviewing the explanatory material, students identify the key ideas in ten model sentences. They then, in the second exercise, devise topic ideas and sentences for ten thesis statements and recheck their topic sentences for key ideas. This packet is available upon request; write me in care of the English Department, Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana 47907.

Kathleen Blake Yancey
Purdue University

¹While I think the term "key idea" is a relatively common one, I first came upon it in print in William Smith and Raymond E. Liedlich, From Thought to Theme, 4th ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Inc., 1974), pp. 6 and 11.

Building Administrator and
Faculty Awareness

I would like to offer the following suggestions on means to keep administrators and faculty aware of basic skills programs and their effectiveness.

Both at West Virginia State College and here at Indiana/Purdue-Fort Wayne, my office has published monthly progress reports for distribution to academic departments and school administrators. These reports focus on program activities, both newly begun and continuing, provide a continuous updating on statistics of student participation and give a forum for presenting explanations of present goals. These reports also include a calendar of activities for the upcoming month and a reminder to recipients of services offered them (i.e., classroom visitations for study skill presentations, text readability surveys, student referral service, and tutorial opportunities). The report ends with a monthly thank-you to some individual who has helped our program. This may be an instructor who has invited us to visit her/his class, or it might be an administrator who has actively shown support of our program. Also, administrators have, at times, personally commended faculty mentioned

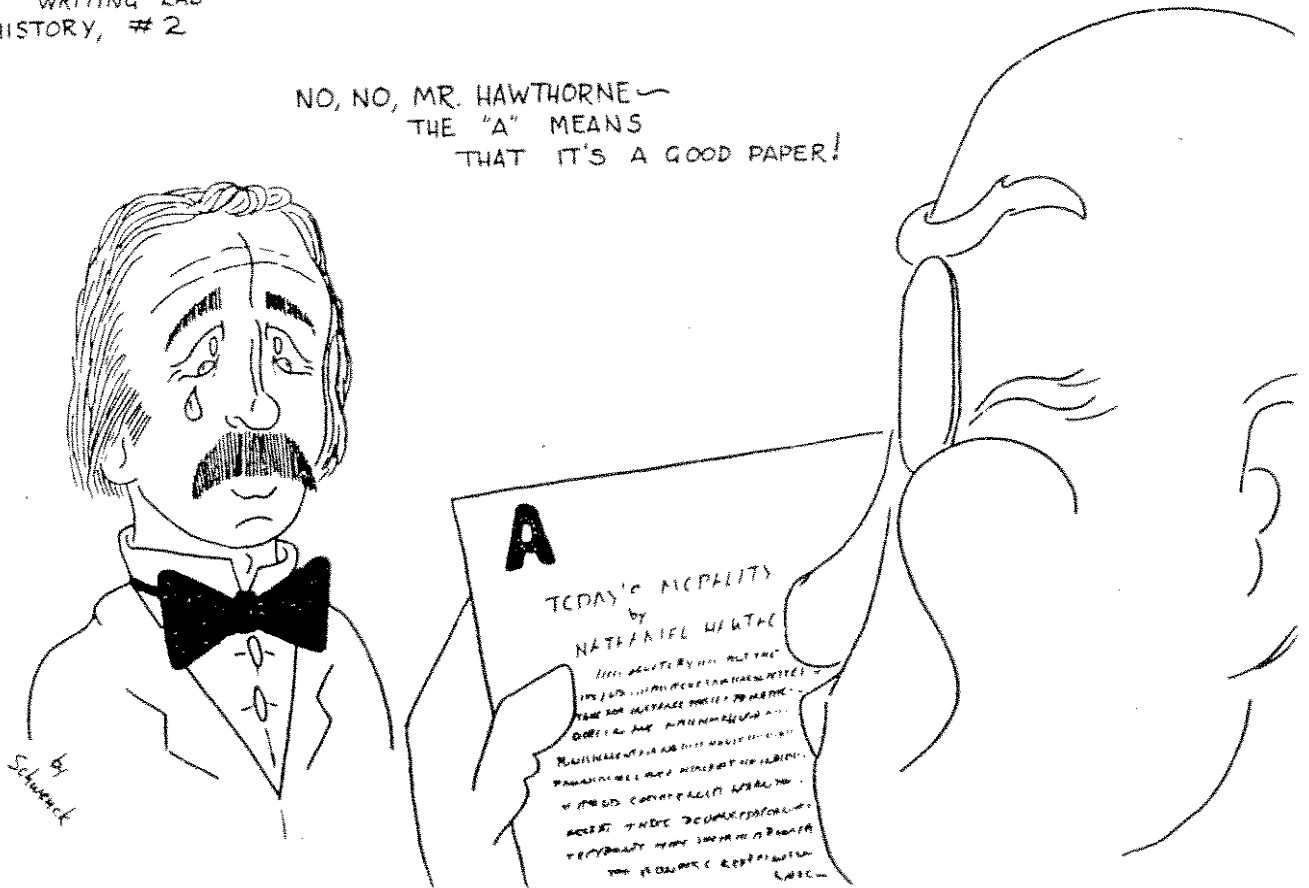
in the monthly thank-you, which in turn has reinforced faculty support for Transitional Studies.

A second publication that has helped with administrators and with students is our D.S.C. (Developmental Skills Center) D-mention, an occasional journal of student writing. Although LaVerne Gonzalez of Purdue (Lafayette) deserves full credit for developing this idea, I can affirm from first-hand observation that it works. Not only have administrators indicated their approval, but student motivation and pride are stimulated by seeing their names in print and by knowing their writing is being distributed university-wide. These are two of the best ways I've found to elicit positive program support within the university community.

Michael F. O'Hear
Coordinator, Transitional Studies
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GREAT MOMENTS
IN WRITING LAB
HISTORY, #2

NO, NO, MR. HAWTHORNE—
THE "A" MEANS
THAT IT'S A GOOD PAPER!



In the December, 1977 issue, two of the contributors together reminded me that I have been neglecting to share with you some rather fascinating stuff. First, Mr. Erickson from North Dakota State asks if we can't somehow pay attention to Benjamin Bloom's latest tome (of which the Phi Delta Kappan recently asked, "Isn't this the most important book in Education this century?") Second, Ms. Perkins from St. Cloud State University offers a scheme for organization which revolves around "big" answers to thesis-level questions.

We are concerned that the pedagogical atomization of language for the sake of a mastery approach leaves the language acquirer with a command of a fractionated sort of "languageclassese." I'm sure you have reviewed numerous examples of prose produced by students who have a command of this brand of language. Most of us who learned foreign languages during the heyday of the audio-lingual approach have a strong feel for what I mean. Language is viewed, in this orientation, as object, not process.

However, we've experimented successfully with a nifty way of breaking the process up into parts, each of which has integrity, and the sum of which seems to give the language acquirer a nice handle on the logic of connected expository discourse. So far our materials are only very loosely hung together at the level of the paragraph, but the potential is rather impressive. I used the materials myself this past term, typos and all, in a primarily autotutorial mode. Most of my students who initially hadn't any notion of what an expository paragraph was capable of accomplishing, finished the semester (of a two credit-hour course) with not only a good grasp on the process of paragraphing, but also with improved command of the mechanical bits and pieces.

Beyond that, of course, is the fact that the rhetoric of the isolated expository paragraph can be the rhetoric of the essay. I am convinced that my students have command of at least one super language process. If you take Ms. Perkins' approach to the essay, compress it to the size of a paragraph, and break it up into small, easily acquired parts, you then have what we have: the beginnings of an autotutorial, mastery approach to the acquisition of paragraphing which does not suffer the consequences of the molecular approach usually

We have nothing but dog-eared copies of the first draft of our materials to offer. They are replete with errors and are to undergo a strenuous revision and a more precise evaluation. I'm really impressed with them, though, and I'm not bashful about sharing them.

Jon Jonz, Director
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The Contemporary College Reader by a member of our newsletter group, Joyce Steward (University of Wisconsin, Madison), is described by the publisher as follows:

Forty-seven brief and lively essays in this collection expose students to expository methods they can apply to their own writing. Essays are organized by rhetorical modes, with brief introductions to each mode, an annotated model essay at the beginning of each section, three sets of study questions for each essay, and an index of terms on language and rhetoric.

Professor Steward's reader, published by Scott Foresman (\$5.50), is a cornucopia of good writing, offers a wide variety of modern writers (Robert Pirsig, Russell Baker, Studs Terkel, Shirley Chisholm, Tom Wolfe, Brenda Gill, etc.) with a good mix from the classic (Thoreau, Melville, Swift, etc.), and is one of the few recently published paperback readers with a type size not designed to induce instant eyestrain.

SET IT WRITE, a conference on the teaching of writing, will be held on April 28-29, at Illinois State University, Normal, Illinois. This conference, which offers teachers in the mid-west an opportunity to discuss common problems and possible solutions, will feature workshops and papers as well as an address by the noted author and teacher, Arnold Tibbetts. For more information and a brochure listing all the papers and workshops, write to:

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In the fall of 1976 the English Learning Center (ELC) opened under almost ideal conditions at Del Mar College, a two-year community college in Corpus Christi, Texas. The wall between two classrooms in the English Building was taken down, the floor was carpeted, and 34 carrels equipped with Wollensak Tape Players and Sawyer Slide Projectors and five tables for programmed materials and testing were moved in. A counter-storage unit was put in front of library shelves for storage on one wall, and two file cabinets and a desk for the director and assistant completed the furniture arrangement. This year the director has requested two CRT terminals, IBM 3278, Model 2, for the ELC in order to get better use of our Computer Assisted Instruction (CAI) courses. Pictures were hung on a picture rail around three sides of the room, a wallpaper mural of a wooded scene was put on the fourth wall beside the shelves, and hanging baskets of devil's ivy and planters of ficus trees completed the decor.

Funding was by the College, the initial cost being approximately \$20,000 for all hard- and software. Continuing costs are for salaries of the director, the assistant, and the tutors and for supplies, such as lamps, tapes, and duplicating. Next year a director of the ELC will be paid \$16,185 to work in the ELC and teach two classes; he has a Ph.D. and the rank of assistant professor in the English Department. The assistant will be paid \$12,265 to work in the ELC days and two evenings a week; she has a Bachelor's Degree and the rank of teaching assistant. Student tutors are recommended by teachers and trained by the director and the assistant; they must have high grades in at least two courses in English; they are paid the minimum wage.

The ELC works mainly on an English teacher referral system, but any student on either of the two Del Mar campuses, whether registered for an English course or not, may come to the ELC for help with writing. Teachers give diagnostic tests in the classroom or send students to the ELC for testing. Work may then be assigned to the student based on the result of these diagnostic tests. Students are also referred to the ELC to correct specific weaknesses that show up in their writing. Referral slips listing the areas in which a student needs help are filled in by the teacher and taken to the ELC by the student, who is then given the appropriate materials. When the student completes his course of study and passes

a test with the required percentage (at least 80% in most work), the ELC worker signs his referral sheet for him to take back to his teacher. The director and assistant also work on an individual basis with students to improve writing; tutors check materials in and out and grade test with keys.

Next fall three ELC courses--grammar, spelling, vocabulary--will be offered for the first time; for 16 contact hours' work in the ELC, a student may get one semester hour's credit. This spring six classes are being used in a pilot program to teach minimum competencies in the following courses: 606, a six-hour course for students who make below 12 on ACT or 350 on SAT; 302, a three-hour course for students who make between 12 and 15 on ACT or 350 and 400 on SAT; 601a, a three-hour regular freshman English course for students who make above 15 on ACT or 400 on SAT. This program will be tested again during the 1978 summer session, but by the fall 1978 term all students in 606, 302, and 601a classes will be required to pass the minimum competency tests with at least 80% accuracy.

Materials of most worth to us have been the Educulture Mini-courses, a tape-text series; Audio-Visual Approach to Writing, a slide-tape-workbook series; Wordcraft, an audio-visual workbook; programmed texts, particularly English 2200, English 2600, and English 3200. In addition, our own faculty have prepared valuable audio-visual and Computer Assisted Instruction programs, as well as book exercises, tests, progress charts, study guides, and worksheets.

The only evaluation of the ELC so far has been by questionnaire filled in by students and teachers at the end of the term. Both groups have indicated their enthusiasm for the ELC. The administration has not requested a formal study of the effectiveness of the ELC or any kind of accountability report. Both administration and faculty were, and are, committed to the idea of a learning center and apparently are very pleased with the operation.

The general feeling seems to be that it justifies its existence by creating a pleasant atmosphere for the students while they work at essentially egregious remedial tasks and by providing a structured vehicle for the faculty to deal with those tasks in the ELC while they concentrate in class on what the catalogue describes as the course content.

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