

# THE WRITING AB

N E W S L E T T E R

Volume 21, Number 10  
ing of writing

Promoting the exchange of voices and ideas in one-to-one teaching of writing  
June, 1997

## ...FROM THE EDITOR...

This month's newsletter has a number of resources I hope will be useful for you: the "Resources for Writing Center Studies" (pages 12-13) and the list of the current National Writing Centers Association Executive Board (page 14). That list of board members will help as you think about whom you'd also want to see listed there. Then, you can respond to Joan Mullin's Call for Nominations to the Board (page 10). Voting will be by a ballot included in a fall issue of the newsletter.

What you won't find in this month's issue is Michael Pemberton's "Writing Center Ethics" column as he was otherwise engaged recently with the birth of the newest little Pemberton—Kara Lutz, 9 lbs., 5 oz.! Congratulations to Kara and family who are all doing fine. If Kara can spare the time during the summer, she'll help her father write that column for the September issue.

This issue also wraps up Volume 21 of the newsletter. I look forward to gearing up again next fall when we launch into Volume 22 with the September issue. Until then, I wish us all a long, cool, relaxing, and rejuvenating summer with four-star R&R time. Take care.

• Muriel Harris, editor

## ...INSIDE...

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## A guide for writing tutors working with dyslexic students

I was sitting in the Writing Center at the El Paso Community College one afternoon when she walked in. Susan had dyslexia. I could tell as soon as we began reviewing her paper. I knew because I saw myself in Susan and my work in hers. That afternoon brought back many memories and made me realize what I had overcome to become a journalist and now graduate student and Teaching Assistant at the University of Texas at El Paso, as well as a writing tutor in the Writing Center at EPCC. I also realized I had something to share with my peers.

As a tutor I am fortunate to have the opportunity to work with many students. Each has different strengths and weaknesses. It is the job of a tutor to point out the strengths and address the weaknesses of each writer. As a dyslexic myself, I have developed many personal strategies for coping with the disability. I would like to share some of these techniques with other tutors.

### What is dyslexia?

Dyslexia—from the Greek *dys*,

meaning “faulty,” + *lexis*, meaning “speech,” + *legere*, meaning “to read”—is a learning disability, believed to stem from a neurophysiological flaw in the brain’s ability to process language. It is not a disease, as it can not be cured. Yet it can be overcome; therefore, it is merely a disability. The disability afflicts many individuals possessing above-average intelligence (Simpson 41). Although it is not known for sure, dyslexia is believed to be inherited. The disability affects 5% of the American population

(Brachacki, Nicholson, and Fawcett 297).

The pitfalls of dyslexia do not end with one’s ability to process language, nor do they end at the elementary school level. It is a disability which hinders one’s ability to process information in general and in most cases lasts a lifetime. Dyslexia is typically first spotted when a child begins to read, because reading and recognizing the letters of the alphabet are the central activities of early schooling (Brachacki, Nicholson and Fawcett). But many dyslexic students score poorly on various aspects of standardized tests measuring competency in subjects such as math. This shows dyslexia hinders one’s ability to read, and it can affect several areas of a student’s education—and an individual’s life.

During the first year of college, students who managed to get by in high school may not know they possess the disability. Writing tutors can look for several warning signs. Many dyslexic students will have difficulty with grammar, spelling, and reading comprehension—language in general. Most writing tutors will see these problems in many essays, though. For most students their speech will resemble their writing. But a dyslexic student will many times be able to explain orally a writing assignment, and what they would like to do, but struggle when putting their ideas into clear form on the written page. A thoughtful, in-depth discussion can translate into unorganized rambling on the written page (Orton Society). The opposite is true as well. A student who may struggle to oralize thoughts may find his/her avenue of expression on the written page. The written essay many times will be not nearly the same caliber as the student demonstrated orally. In many cases transferring coherent ideas in a dyslexic’s mind to paper can prove troublesome, but strategies can be developed to help in this area.

A dyslexic student might also incur information processing difficulties in the form of following steps. Struggling to follow steps is an obvious problem for students learning to write, as writing is a very process- or step-by-step-oriented task. Many students can see where they are and where they want to be, but not how to get from where they are to where they want to be. This problem is not limited to writing, but can occur when one is walking across campus. (The author tends to get lost easily.)

An additional problem with the disability is that it is often misdiagnosed and mistreated at the elementary and secondary levels. This can lead to a variety of emotional traumas. Many students are deemed “slow” by teachers, or said to be simply “not trying.” Many dyslexic students spend much of their elementary and secondary years in remedial classes or in resource rooms, or clumped with children suffering from retardation and disciplinary problems. The effect on one’s psyche is obvious—it is no wonder some dyslexic children grow up with anxiety problems. I remember being a big, shy eighth grader who spent each afternoon in the resource room of my junior high/high school. Others in the room included retarded citizens and students who had recently returned from drug rehabilitation. Students not in this class were quick to stigmatize. These problems can lead to many troubles when students reach freshman basic composition courses. Many students will be tentative to speak in class, for fear of looking “stupid.” Many times the worst thing a tutor can do is be quick to criticize these students. The potential loss of confidence can affect their entire college career.

### What To Do

When a tutor suspects a student may be dyslexic, the best thing the tutor can do is to suggest testing and refer the student to the university or college’s center for the learning disabled. Many

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**Manuscripts:** Recommended length for articles is ten to fifteen double-spaced typed pages, three to five pages for reviews, and four pages for the Tutors’ Column, though longer and shorter manuscripts are invited. If possible, please send a 3 and 1/4 in. disk with the file, along with the hard copy. Please enclose a self-addressed envelope with return postage not pasted to the envelope. The deadline for announcements is 45 days prior to the month of issue (e.g. August 15 for October issue).

Please send articles, reviews, announcements, comments, queries, and yearly subscription payments to the editor.

students are reluctant to be tested or even see what is offered for the learning disabled. I know from experience that it is in the student's best interest to both be tested and, if there is indeed a disability, to take advantage of the services offered.

### The Test

There is no one test to determine dyslexia. A battery of tests—ranging from a psychological evaluation to a hand-eye coordination check—are given at various locations throughout the U. S. Once a student is diagnosed as dyslexic various doors are opened. For a one-time fee of \$37.50 a student can take advantage of over 80,000 text books on four-track tapes offered through a federal program called the Recordings for the Blind and Dyslexic. If the Recordings for Blind and Dyslexic office does not have the desired text, the student may simply mail the required text to the office and it will be taped free of charge. (For a list of test locations or other information, one can contact: The Orton Dyslexic Society; Suite 382; Chester Building; 8600 LaSalle Rd.; Baltimore, MD. 21286-2044, or by phone at (410) 296-0232, or by fax at (410) 321-5069.)

### Ways to tutor a dyslexic student

Most dyslexics thrive by receiving information orally and a hands-on approach to learning. Information should be broken down and mastered in bits. With this in mind I suggest that whenever possible writing tutors should seek to discuss assignments and model various aspects of the writing process for the students.

### Individual strategies

In many cases a tutor can help a student to develop personal learning strategies which will help that student achieve success. The strategies can range from taking advantage of various government programs designed to help dyslexics, by providing text books-on-tape, to finding out at what time of day the student works best and suggesting he or she set a daily routine by which

to study. An example of this is that I wake each morning before 5 a.m. to write. As an undergraduate I realized this was when I worked best. In high school I found a hallway beneath the main floor of the library, and I would go there from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. several nights a week.

### Step-by-step

Many times a dyslexic simply takes longer to master things. This has nothing to do with intelligence. A tutor can carefully check each writing assignment, looking for patterns and working on one problem at a time. This breaks down the information a student is processing. Dyslexic students can thrive on this step-by-step approach. Many students can sit down and bang out a first-rate essay with little or no prewriting. In the case of dyslexic students, this is not likely. The process of writing—from brainstorm, to outline, to draft, to final product—must be emphasized and repeated using various styles. A step-by-step manner must be emphasized. If the process is mastered one step at a time, the dyslexic student will *see the product take form* and better understand how it was accomplished.

### Write-like-you-talk

In order to write well, one must know how to speak well. Many good writers don't always use proper English, but they know how to if they so choose. It is essential for students to see and grasp the correlation between one's ability to speak in standard English, and to read and write. One skill leads to the others. Tutors can help dyslexic students improve their writing by noticing if the student speaks in complete sentences and encouraging the student to "write like you talk," if they do. Grammar problems will decrease once students grasp the idea of proper sentence structure, through the verbalization of their thoughts.

Aside from improving sentence structure, discussion of an essay allows for dyslexic students to verbalize their

ideas and what they are trying to do. This oral-driven atmosphere is where many dyslexics will make the most gains. Tutors can combine an oral approach to essay outlining with the typical written approach. Many dyslexic students grasp ideas and information orally better than on the written page; thus tutors should work along those lines. A tutor who works with a dyslexic student regularly should try to incorporate discussions regarding the student's essay into their tutorial sessions. To a dyslexic the discussion of writing assignments can be a vital part of the writing process. It is in discussion that many dyslexics will organize information.

### Select topics of interest to the student

Many dyslexics are very one-track minded. They find one thing and focus on it—and only on that one thing. (As a youngster I would only draw, write, and read books about hockey.) This can give a teacher headaches, but can also lead to successes and greatness in one area. Woodrow Wilson, Leonardo da Vinci, Tom Cruise, Albert Einstein, W.B. Yeats, Gustave Flaubert, and Bruce Jenner are all dyslexics. With hard work and inner drive they overcame obstacles to achieve success (Seekins, 2). With this in mind, whenever possible, tutors should encourage dyslexic students to write on topics they know about and are interested in. Dyslexics will have a better chance to excel under these circumstances. They have more difficulty than other students focusing on areas which they are not interested in. An assignment they are interested in will lead to all-out effort and an unmistakable passion in their writing.

### Complimenting to build confidence

If a tutor suspects a student might be dyslexic and sees the student suffering from a lack of confidence, it is necessary to find strong aspects of the student's work and complement those areas. (Works Cited on page 10)

# An ounce of prevention: Ensuring safety in the writing center

## Background

Last fall, pondering what writing center “situation” I could use as a focus for an NCTE workshop I was facilitating, several events presented themselves that enabled me to identify my workshop topic without hesitation. First, aware that my workshop audience contained both secondary and post-secondary educators, I decided to create an annotated bibliography focused on writing centers in unusual sites and situations based upon a systematic review of the back issues of *Writing Lab Newsletter* and *Writing Center Journal*. Second, while cleaning out my e-mail account, I happened on a WCenter message from Mary Massirer at Baylor University requesting advice on how to handle a situation involving a threatening student in the writing center. Third, I was engaged in a running struggle to get my writing center’s locks differentiated from the building’s master key because there are too many copies of the master key floating around for my comfort. Getting this change made, however, involved a protracted discussion with the head of campus security.

This discussion revolved around me reassuring the campus security director, Jim, that my concern about proliferating master keys was not a reflection on his campus security staff, and Jim bemoaning the students’ naiveté concerning living safely in an urban environment. It was when he said, “These kids are muggings and carjackings waiting to happen,” that I realized, with something of a jolt, that I had just been handed my NCTE workshop topic: safety issues in and around the writing center.

Before I went through the trouble of actually scripting the presentation, however, I returned to the literature and confirmed my sense that very little

has been said in print about this topic. While putting the issue of writing center safety on display in the highly-visible forum of an academic journal runs counter to the typical up-beat tenor of the community’s literature, discussions such as this may help to move what appears to be a taboo—or, at the very least, innocently ignored—subject out into the open. Confronting the issue of safety in the center in this manner can

- raise community awareness that, more often than not, most writing center programs are not adequately prepared to deal with crises of any kind, and
- help others initiate a proactive research, planning and implementation process for educating writing center directors and staff members about potential dangers and how to best prepare for their possible occurrence.

## But, this can’t happen to us

Unless we experience dangerous or disturbing events first-hand, it is often difficult to imagine that they could invade the bucolic environs of the average writing center.

Q: How likely is it really that any of the following scenarios could occur?

- A student, in a rage, brandishes a knife at a member of a writing center staff.
- The writing center is the target of a bomb threat.
- A writing center director is punched by a very large, very powerful, very angry student.
- A faculty member, suffering a psychotic episode, barricades himself in the writing center.
- A writing center is burglarized and/or vandalized.
- A client suffers a medical emergency in the writing center.
- A student with a long history of de-

stroying computer in schools he has attended is referred to the writing center with no mention made of his past actions.

A: Each scenario has happened. As unlikely as they may sound, these are events that colleagues in secondary and post-secondary level writing centers and I have witnessed in the writing centers in which we have worked.

The events that converged to prompt me to think carefully about the issue of safety in and around the center was catalyzed in large part by a series of e-mail messages that appeared on WCenter during early November 1995. These messages brought the issue of safety home in a way that it had not since I watched in horror as a college football linebacker reached back and took a swing at my colleague, friend, and boss in my first writing center home. Mary Massirer’s initial message took me back a number of years to confront an event I would rather pretend had not happened and that no one in the writing center was prepared to react to in an immediate and appropriate manner. Reading the responses that message generated, however, helped me deal with the anger that I still harbored and begin to work to ensure that, if possible, events such as this do not reoccur in a writing center I work with.

8 Nov. 1995  
Mary Massirer  
“Threatening student”

Our Writing Center is open until 9:00 at night and is staffed by two students at a time. Last night the two staffers were both female. A male student came in (he’s been in before) and told Kim, one of the female tutors, that he wanted to talk. She became suspicious and felt in-

creasingly threatened by his behavior. When 9:00 came, she and her colleague had a hard time getting him to leave. Fortunately, another student (male) helped convince him to get out. My question is—have you had clients who pose a threat (at least perceived) to other people in your writing center? How did you handle the situation?

How do you handle a student in this, or similarly disturbing, situation?

- Kick them out.
- Call the cops.
- Get out of the center and find help.

While all of these options present viable solutions to situations of the type Mary described in her message, these solutions are only short term. Visceral and immediate reactions to scenarios of this type lack the benefit of systematic planning and critical review needed to insure

- 1) the option's viability within the unique setting of any writing center, and
- 2) the option's legal/procedural validity.

### What should I do?

Before heading off half-cocked into the next staff meeting or rushing to revise the center's procedures manual, it is best to think carefully through the situation of concern. Although the potential for danger exists across the board, each writing center is distinct, existing in a unique set of circumstances which help to define the types and extent of problems that might arise within their walls. For instance, writing centers in rural institutions or secondary schools are probably less likely than are their urban counterparts to face the problem of people wandering into the writing center from off the street. All locations, however, are probably as susceptible to attracting the unwanted attention of people with psychological problems—particularly given most writing centers' open door policies, highly individualized and personalized interaction, and wide spread advertisement of their status as student

support agencies.

Given the local and idiosyncratic reality of each writing center, it is worthwhile to consider the following series of questions—or, ones like them—before committing oneself and staff to a specific course of preventive action. (Take time to think these questions through.) :

1. Has a (potentially) threatening or dangerous situation arisen in any writing center to which you have been affiliated? What were the details of the incident?
2. Have you heard of such situations occurring in other writing centers? What were the details of the incident?
3. How were the incidents resolved? Looking back, were these optimum resolutions?

Among the responses to Mary's query that I found particularly useful was the following from Paula Gillespie:

*8 Nov. 1995  
Paula Gillespie  
"Threatening student"*

Mary, yours is a situation I know well. A few years ago a student threatened one of my tutors. He felt slighted by something she said jokingly, brooded about it, and called her, threatening her with physical harm. I was at home at the time and they called me asking what they should do. Call campus security was my first reaction. And I got in my car and headed down. When I got to campus the Milwaukee Police were in the center questioning the tutor and another, who took the call. Calls such as these have to be referred by our campus security. All the police were able to do was issue him a citation for disorderly conduct, but things didn't end there.

We got in touch with our counseling center to get some ideas about how to deal with him if he reap-

peared. Our campus security stayed around for a few days, maintaining a presence. Meanwhile the counseling center got busy with the student. They set up a contract with him; he had to stick by the terms of the contract or be expelled. He had to apologize to the tutor and to me, and promise never to harm anyone. He had to go into therapy and be regular in his visits with a psychiatrist, someone not on our staff of counselors.

We also maintained good contact with his FY comp teacher, who for other reasons feared him.

But my main concern was the safety and well being of my staff. The director of the counseling center came to the next staff meeting and talked the situation through with all of us, drawing out the fears the tutors had.

Ultimately the student was expelled for not seeing his psychiatrist regularly.

We were not able to prevent him from using our services, because we had no policy in place to allow us to deny students our services. Now we do. Posted in the main office we have a sign that says

### Conduct Expectations

The Norman H. Ott Memorial Writing Center expects those who use our services to respect the rights of others. Responsible conduct is expected and required. Individuals who engage in unacceptable behavior such as physical and/or verbal abuse may lose their writing center privileges and/or be subject to university disciplinary action.

Mary, I hope this helps you and any others who might face this kind of problem.

Three points stand out in Paula's reply that merit further discussion:

- the limits of most campus security systems,
- the rights of the individual in question, and
- the need for established policy.

Innocently enough, I suppose that most of us believe that if we call on our campus security system to handle a problem in the writing center, it is equipped to make the incident and the perpetrator vanish—gone, over, forgotten. Many campus “cops,” however, have extremely limited jurisdictions and authority. On my campus, for instance, the security officers are essentially members of a security company who maintain an on-campus presence, serve as intermediaries to the city police department, and are authorized to detain people until city police officers can get to campus. Put simply, they are available to help make a complete police report and very little else, other than lock and unlock buildings and monitor the parking garage. Larger campuses, with more professional and autonomous campus security organizations, often serve as either extensions of their local police force or are granted on-campus policing jurisdiction, sometimes enjoying arrest privileges in the immediate, but carefully defined, surrounding vicinity.

The following important point is worth noting: It is imperative that we know the limits of on-campus security’s authority and jurisdiction and that local police are called in on almost every “bothersome” situation. Ancillary to the issue of authority and jurisdiction is the fact that on-campus incidents can exist in an often hazy, never-never land of student disciplinary codes. As distressing as it is to admit, dangerous incidents are not always treated the same depending on whether they occur on- or off-campus: whereas the incident mentioned earlier of a student striking a writing center director is without a doubt an offense which merits an assault charge. Because it occurred 1) on-campus, 2) involved a student, and 3) was reported to the campus police department, its

adjudication fell under the jurisdiction of the college’s internal student conduct code, not city statutes. As such, the only action taken was that the Dean of Students forbade the student from entering the writing center again (no allowance was made, however, to deal with the fact that the student was in class three times a week in a classroom immediately across the hall from the writing center and seemed to delight in hanging out before and after class in full view of the writing center staff). Other than that restriction, however, the writing center director and staff were not made privy to any further disciplinary action—if any—because of the confidentiality of student records.

The moral: Know what on-campus offenses are handed over to institutional adjudication.

The third point rising from Paula’s reply is the importance of establishing specific procedures to govern client and staff activity within the writing center. While it is time-consuming to formulate, institute, and regularly review policies that, hopefully, never have to be called upon, doing so helps to provide both procedural and legal viability for the writing center in cases when action is called for. While academe is not the most litigious of communities, it does function on precedent. As with challenges to such procedural issues as tenure decisions, for instance, a basic principle in removing the possibility of successful litigation is to have a stated policy regarding an issue, follow that policy consistently, and document adherence to that policy. As with Paula’s incident, not having a stated conduct policy governing behavior in the writing center made it impossible to bar the offensive student from the writing center premises. With such a policy in place and available for public inspection, they can bar access to the writing center and its staff when needed; however, if it is to withstand challenge, such an injunction must be able to be demonstrated that it is applied consistently.

This awareness of the need for proactive and careful planning for worst-case scenarios is reflected in Katie Fischer’s reply to Paula’s message:

*8 Nov. 1995*

*Katie Fischer*

*“Threatening student”*

In addition to detailing their response to the already threatening occasion at her w.c., I think Paula points out something we need to be aware of in our writing centers . . . the what-if. We have not had such threatening events here . . . yet. But last year we brainstormed about what if someone were to come into the lab during later night hours when the assistant was the only one around. Together we came up with a list of procedures. Included on this is also other emergency situations . . . what if a client or tutor needs medical attention? What if the power goes off? And so on. We review the procedures; they are in print and part of the tutor’s training materials. An ounce of prevention, you know.

### **What to plan for? What to ask?**

Starting to posit possible problem encounters in the writing center is tantamount to opening Pandora’s box. Once brought into the open, the issues never go away. Likewise, they seem to increase exponentially, revealing, if nothing else, the naiveté within which we often go about our everyday activities. A place to begin grappling with the issue of safety in and around your writing center is to engage in a process of self and program assessment. Figure 1 (page 7) provides a general (non-institutional specific) questionnaire to guide the initial process of determining how well prepared a writing center program is to handle a wide range of potential problem situations.

Additionally, many resources are readily accessible to help this process

of crafting and instituting needed policies. Because campus crime statistics are required by law to be available to prospective students and other stakeholders, schools have a large stake in helping to insure that nothing untoward ever happens in the writing center. As such, such services as campus security and counseling services should willingly assist in this process from the initial

planning stage, through the drafting and implementing of procedures, to the training of staff to consistently and accurately follow the established procedures and policies. Likewise, the institution's legal counsel can also be consulted during this process—in fact, many institutions, such as my own, mandate such consulting when establishing policies and procedures of this

nature.

The National Education Association also has a valuable resource to assist in such a process as this. Their 1989 publication, *Classroom Encounters: Problems, Case Studies, Solutions*, by R. Baird Shuman, provides a daunting number and variety of actual situations endured by educators from across the country and the range of educational levels. Presented as individual cases grouped under larger problem areas, each incident is reviewed in detail and specific “best case” solutions are offered for discussion and consideration. This book has the potential for not only helping those writing center personnel on whom the task falls for creating needed policies and procedures, but for serving as a training resource for the larger group of staff impacted by these policies' implementation.

### Conclusion

Finally, enough cannot be said in support of ~~trusting in intuition~~ and a sense of uneasiness or discomfort in any setting. Within the writing center situation, that trust must be instilled in all members of the staff, not just in the person in charge, and should be augmented by overt and continuing discussion and training. Pandora's box of potential writing center-based nightmare material may never be shut for you; however, with a proactive process of planning, at least these scenarios can more often than not be dismissed as bad dreams capable of being handled safely, decisively, and judiciously.

Eric Hobson  
Eastern Illinois University  
Charleston, IL

### Works Cited

Fischer, Katie. “Re: Threatening Student.” 8 Nov. 1995. Online posting. WCenter  
wcenter@listserv.ttu.edu. 8 Nov. 1995.

Gillespie, Paula. “Re: Threatening Student.” 8 Nov. 1995. Online posting. WCenter

### Self and Program Assessment Questionnaire

1. My writing center has a formal strategy for dealing with “problem” students/clients/visitors.  
Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_
2. My writing center staff has been formally briefed about how to conduct themselves in situations where they feel uncomfortable and/or at risk.  
Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_  
If “Yes,” when was this briefing held last?
3. The writing center staff is aware of the campus policy governing acceptable and unacceptable behavior among students, staff, faculty, and visitors.  
Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_
4. The writing center staff is aware of types of actions (implied and enacted) that are deemed physical, psychological, and sexual, harassment, abuse, assault, and battery.  
Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_
5. The writing center is part of an established beat for campus security during evening hours.  
Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_
6. Campus and local police emergency numbers are clearly accessible near the writing center phone, or are programmed into the telephone's speed dialing options.  
Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_
7. Writing center staff work by themselves during times with little traffic nearby.  
Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_
8. The layout of my writing center allows for unobstructed views of its work space.  
Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_
9. The head of my campus security is \_\_\_\_\_.
10. This person knows the writing center exists.  
Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_
11. Writing center staff are familiar with safety and evacuation procedures for the building and campus in case of fire, violent weather, earthquakes, etc.  
Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_
12. The following items are housed in, or near to the writing center:
 

First aid kit:	Yes ___	No ___
Fire extinguisher:	Yes ___	No ___
Flashlight:	Yes ___	No ___
Radio (battery operated)	Yes ___	No ___
13. Is any member of the writing center staff trained in and current with CPR methods and emergency first aid?  
Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_

Figure 1.

## Pacific Coast Writing Center Association

Call for Proposals  
October 11, 1997  
Salem, Oregon  
*"The Writing Center as Research Site"*

Proposals are invited for panels, individual- and group-led workshops, and individual presentations. Sessions will be one hour in length. Panels should allow time for questions and discussion. Workshops (whether individual- or group-led) should involve audience participation as a central component. Individual presentations should be designed to last 15 minutes; presentations on similar topics will be arranged into single sessions.

Please supply the following information: Title; Nature of proposal (panel; workshop; individual presentation); Description of proposed panel, workshop, or individual presentation (abstract of approximately 100 words); Audio-visual and/or computer equipment needs. Include information for yourself and for all panelists or workshop leaders: Name; Position title; Institution; Academic year mailing address; Academic year phone number; Academic year FAX number; Academic year e-mail address; Summer address; Summer phone; Summer e-mail address.

Please send your proposal via e-mail to [eberry@willamette.edu](mailto:eberry@willamette.edu) or mail it to the following address: Eleanor Berry, 1997 PCWCAAC, English Department, Willamette University, 900 State St., Salem, OR 97301. If you mail your proposal, if possible please include a disk with the proposal saved as a MacWord 5.1 or text only file. Proposals must be received by Monday, June 16, 1997.

## Mid-Atlantic Writing Center

April 10, 1998  
Largo, Maryland

## Assembly for the Teaching of English

ing Dept., Prince George's Community College, Largo, MD 20774-2199; phone:  
stumail.pg.cc.md.us

July 18-19, 1997

Williamsport, PA  
Keynote speaker: Art Whimbey

For more information, contact Ed Vavra, DIF112, Pennsylvania College of Technology, One College Avenue,  
Williamsport, PA 17701. Phone: 717-326-3761, ext. 7736; fax: 717-327-4503; e-mail: [EVAVRA@PCT.EDU](mailto:EVAVRA@PCT.EDU); Web

## Conference on Learning Disabilities

October 16-18, 1997  
Burlington, Vermont

Landmark College presents an international conference, "Sharing Our Gifts," on helping students with learning differences. For a booklet detailing session topics, speakers, and registration information, contact Dianne D. Wood, Landmark College, RR 1 Box 1000, Putney, Vermont 05346. Phone: 802-387-6738; fax: 802-387-6781; e-mail: [dwood@landmarkcollege.org](mailto:dwood@landmarkcollege.org)



# TUTORS COLUMN

## Closet consulting

I've been waiting for it to happen for some years now, and it finally did. An earnest looking student walked into my Writing Center office, sat down, described his latest writing assignment (to defend a position), and then announced, "I'm going to write on the sin of homosexuality." "I took a deep breath and then forced what I hoped was a friendly, inquisitive expression to my face. Inwardly, however, my mind raced to negotiate hosts of personal and professional issues.

First and foremost came the personal emotional responses: the uncertainties, the fears, and the doubts, as well as the countervailing frustrations and angers, which have informed my experiences as an increasingly "Out" gay graduate student on a Catholic Jesuit campus. And these feelings only intensified as this very earnest young freshman went on to describe the focus of his paper: he was writing to liberal-minded Christians, warning them away from the possibility of ever accepting homosexuality as an alternative, adequately moral lifestyle. I swallowed a little harder, thinking not only of my recent efforts as a liaison between the Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Group on campus and the Office of Student Affairs, and of our joint attempts to cultivate a more open and inclusive university climate, but also, much more vividly, of my early struggles growing up in a fundamentalist Pentecostal church which preached a vision of Christianity very similar to that of my earnest young writer. I remembered all too well the sort of ultimatum which doctrines like those of young Earnest (as I began to think of him) force upon young, generally closeted gays and lesbians: be gay or be Christian, one or

the other, but never both; a "gay Christian" is a contradiction in terms. For me, this had been lived experience, years in the closet trying frantically not to make that one ultimate choice, even unto the point of marrying my best friend and play-acting the roles of husband and step-father for four and a half years. I was 34, newly separated, and living 2,000 miles from my family and my religious roots before I finally found my way out of the closet, and better yet, found my way into a church with a Christian vision roomy enough to seat me, an Open and Affirming congregation of the United Church of Christ.

And now young Earnest was sitting here in my office, his traditional church doctrines, his scriptural passages, and his sincerity all neatly typed on the three or four pages in his lap, and I was going to have to become for him an intelligent, interested, but not overtly hostile, reader. For a few seconds, I wasn't sure I could do it. In all my hypothetical envisioning of this Writing Center moment, I had somehow never foreseen the profound sense of panic which rushed at me from the past, from the closet whose door I thought I had unhinged in the opening. I had sat through papers on abortion, the death penalty, welfare reform—papers which had profoundly affronted my personal system of values and beliefs—but never had I felt myself, my own identity, so directly threatened—pushed back towards that old ultimatum, that suffocating closet door.

Finally, it was the sheer power of my emotional response which saved the session. Briefly, I considered ending it altogether, finding some excuse to pass

the session on to a less personally invested colleague, but that very consideration restored my professional sense of self. I began to think my way through the emotions, sought to confront and localize them, and quickly found them. They were not emerging from the words of young Earnest, but rather from self doubts as old as my memories; these were voices I had been carrying since childhood—old enemies, old battles.

My smile to young Earnest became less strained. He clearly did not know of my sexual orientation, nor of my "liberal" Christian views on homosexuality, and in that irony I rediscovered my sense of humor, even entertained an instant of devilish delight imagining the look on his face, should I, like Satan masquerading as an angel of light, reveal myself to him. I did not, of course. My sense of professional ethics and mission forbade such an abuse of position. But in the newfound freedom of that moment, the old voices receded, and I found that I could listen with interest to young Earnest's defense of God, Christianity, and traditional morality.

As he read his draft aloud, I took careful notes, forming the critical questions I wanted to ask him:

This Christian audience you are writing to—why have they begun welcoming homosexuals into their churches? What reasons do they offer for accepting homosexuality as an alternative Christian lifestyle? How did they reach that conclusion? Why are they wrong? Are there other 'sins' you think the church has become too accepting of as well? Why do you focus particu-

larly on homosexuality? What do you think churches should tell gays and lesbians who want to join their congregations? Can you think of similar restrictions that the church does, or should, place upon the sexuality of heterosexuals? If you put yourself into the shoes of the Christian audience you are writing to, what difficulties do you think they would have with your arguments? What sorts of arguments do you think they might respond with? How would you respond in turn? How would you describe the tone of your current draft? Can you think of ways your might modify your arguments, or your presentation of them, to make them more effective with this particular audience?"

In the end, of course, I did not ask him any of these questions. That would have quickly overwhelmed him. He would have become either passive, or frustrated, and the session would have finally proved unproductive. But as I watched him struggle with those questions, I did ask I began to actually identify a bit with young Earnest. I remembered myself as a college freshman, carrying my Bible from class to class, quoting Ephesians to resolve some fine point of sociology. And so, as Earnest and I discussed the fine points of audience analysis and rhetorical strategy—expanding upon some, those he could imagine and entertain, and allowing others to pass relatively unexamined—I remembered why I like tutoring in the Writing Center: helping earnest young students sort keys, searching for those which will open the doors to their own intellectual and

**Dyslexic students**  
Jay D. Sloan  
(cont. from page 3)  
Peer Tutor  
Marquette University  
Milwaukee, WI  
Dyslexia afflicts many, and tutors must be aware of it. Here I have suggested some ideas that have helped me to earn a BA. The strategies I have mentioned have been tested through many years of personal trial and error and hard work. Dyslexia is a disability which lasts a lifetime, and coping tech-

## Call for Nominations for the National Writing Center Association Board

We will need to elect five at-large board members, a high school representative, and a vice president, who will normally succeed as president. Each term is for two years.

Please contact the people you nominate and be sure they are willing to run. Typically, the nomination for vice president comes from the current membership of the NWCA board.

Please send nominations (including name, institution and home addresses and phone numbers, and e-mail address) to Joan Mullin, NWCA President, Writing Center, University of Toledo, Toledo, OH 43606, or e-mail to JMULLIN@UOFT02.UTOLEDO.EDU by July 1, 1997.

## Calendar for Writing Centers Associations

Sept. 17-20: National Writing Centers Association/Rocky Mountain Writing Centers Association, in Park City, UT  
Contact: Penny C. Bird, English Dept., Brigham Young U., Box 26280, Provo, UT 84602-6280. Fax: 801-378-4720; phone: 801-378-5471; e-mail: penny\_bird@byu.edu

Oct. 11: Pacific Coast Writing Centers Association, in Salem, OR  
Contact: Eleanor Berry, English Dept., Willamette U., 900 State St., Salem, OR 97301, e-mail: eberry@willamette.edu

Nov. 7-8: Midwest Writing Centers Association, in Kansas City, MO  
Contact: Shireen Carroll, Dept. of English, Davidson College, P.O. Box 1719, Davidson, NC 28036. Phone: 704-892-2012; fax: 704-892-2005; e-mail: shcarroll@davidson.edu

April 18: Mid-Atlantic Writing Center Association, in Largo, MD  
Contact: Richard Profozich, Writing Dept., Prince George's Community College, Largo, MD 20774-2199. Phone: 301-322-0598; e-mail: rlp@pgstumail.pg.cc.md.us

niques must be developed in order to overcome.  
John Corrigan  
El Paso Community College  
El Paso, TX

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## NWCA News from Joan Mullin, President

Since pressures of accountability from legislatures, communities, and businesses increasingly drive our institutions—there has been a steady movement among writing center practitioners to “prove” that what we do produces results. Sorry to introduce such language in a process-oriented group, but the reality is that the economic model—the need to produce, create currency, provide value—dominates our culture. On WCenter and in our publications, there have been debates about whether we should “give in” to the demands for accountability, risk losing our own process models, and become production managers; it’s a danger we need always to assess. However, adopting accountability politics can also forward our own philosophies, strategies and ethics.

The theme of the Pacific Coast Writing Center Association’s annual conference this fall is “The Writing Center as Research Site.” The posting on WCenter by Eleanor Berry that called for papers points out the importance of writing center practice, but goes on to note that

“practice itself provides the occasion for research that informs further practice and, beyond that, develops knowledge valuable for all those involved in assigning, responding to, and evaluating writing. And writing center practitioners frequently become researchers and theorists as well—conducting case studies of writers with whom they work, carrying out surveys of center users, correlating conference assessments with kinds of writing and other variables,

collecting information about rhetorical conventions for writing in different disciplines, reflecting on their own evolving practice, etc. Some of this research is informal; some of it, rigorous. All of it serves to inform the practice of work with writers and writing both within the writing center and beyond it.”

The last lines of this e-mail post prove especially important: writing center work is vital to the larger community. Unless, however, writing centers document what they do and how they do it, others won’t know their value. Unless we talk about how our practices help students as writers and individual learners, we won’t be able to effect change in both our immediate and larger environments. That is something that the Michigan State Writing Center has been able to do with their team of writing consultants, and their connection to the National Writing Project, to the portfolio initiative in their institution, to faculty development on campus, in the community schools and in schools from surrounding states, and in their interconnections with—and therefore support from—local business.

Those of us who attended the East Central Writing Center Association conference in Pittsburgh were stunned by the number of projects engaged in by Patty Stock, Sharon Thomas, and the Michigan writing consultants. Most of us realize we haven’t the support on campus (staff or finances) to replicate their projects; but we could garner that support if our those in charge recog-

nized how writing center practices and philosophy mirror the teaching and learning initiatives currently forwarded by higher education: tailored instruction, efficient delivery, incorporation of technology, a holistic approach to learning. We’ve been doing it all. But few people know that.

Writing Center practices—in this case, our conferences and our connections to activities outside our centers—indicate a desire by writing center people for more exchanges, more publications, more assessments which demonstrate our centrality to educational missions (ones that match our philosophies). These calls also point to a need for more accountability of writing centers: that is, the creation of a critical mass of publications directed to those in the community outside the writing center, as well as to ourselves, which demonstrate how we have met and exceeded recent calls for improving education. How can we get support in our current environments unless we explain to others the value (there’s the economics again) of what we do?

Writing Centers undergoing program review need articles to point to, models to show colleagues, and fairly generated statistics (that we have created) against which they can be measured. So many of us are busier than ever, and yet, we need to take time to write for publication, post on WCenter, and present at conferences what it is we do so as to create a bank of research from which we can all draw. That’s one reason to look ahead to the national conference in Salt Lake City in the fall: it’s an opportunity to support and be supported by the wealth of ideas and research we have accumulated since the last conference, to get feedback, and then to publicize or activate those ideas in order to increase community support for what we do. See you there!

## Resources for Writing Center Studies

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compiled by Muriel Harris and Mary Jo Turley  
updated May 1997

### Organizations:

- National Writing Centers Association, \$10/year membership  
Contact: Michael A. Pemberton, NWCA Treasurer  
Department of English  
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tel: 217/333-7014  
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Marquette University  
PO Box 1881  
Milwaukee, WI 53201-1881  
tel: 414/288-3590, fax: /288-3591  
e-mail: gillespiep@vms.csd.mu.edu
- Regional associations  
Regional groups include East Central WCA; South Central WCA; Michigan WCA; Southeastern WCA; Midwest WCA; Pacific Coast WCA; New England WCA; Mid-Atlantic WCA; South Carolina WCA; Rocky Mountain WCA; and CUNY WCA.  
(Leadership for each changes yearly. A calendar of upcoming conferences, along with contact names, appears monthly in the *Writing Lab Newsletter*.)
- Electronic discussion group: WCenter  
To subscribe to WCenter, do the following:  
send to: listproc@listserv.ttu.edu  
(no subject line)  
message: subscribe wcenter <your name>  
(For further information, contact Lady Falls Brown: ykflb@ttacs.ttu.edu)
- Website: <http://www2.colgate.edu/diw/NWCA.html>

### Conferences:

- National Writing Centers Association Conference:  
Meets every 18-24 months — next at Park City, UT — September 17-20, 1997  
Contact Penny C. Bird, Chair — 801/378-5471 — E-mail: penny\_bird@byu.edu
- Regional conferences meet annually and are announced in the *Writing Lab Newsletter*.  
(Each newsletter has a calendar of upcoming conferences.)

### Publications:

- *Writing Lab Newsletter* (ten issues yearly, September to June), \$15/year (US)  
Muriel Harris, editor (Canada/\$20, Overseas/\$40)  
1356 Heavilon Hall / English  
Purdue University  
West Lafayette, Indiana 47907-1356  
tel: 765/494-7268  
fax: 765/494-3780  
e-mail: harrism@cc.purdue.edu or turleymj@cc.purdue.edu
- *Writing Center Journal* (two issues yearly), \$10/year (US)  
Joan Mullin, editor (Canada/\$15, Overseas/\$15)  
The Writing Center  
The University of Toledo  
2801 W. Bancroft St.  
Toledo, OH 43606-3390  
tel: 419/530-4913 fax: 419/530-4752  
e-mail: jmullin@uoft02.utoledo.edu

• *NWCA Press*

Byron Stay, editor (or) Carl Glover, managing editor  
 E-mail: stay@msmary.edu E-mail: glover@msmary.edu  
 PO Box 7007  
 16300 Old Emmitsburg Road  
 Emmitsburg, MD 21727 Phone: 301/447-5355 (Stay)

**Subscription Rates:**

Options	U.S.	Canada	Overseas	Send Check to:
NWCA Membership	\$10	\$10	\$10	Pemberton
<i>Writing Lab Newsletter</i>	\$15	\$20	\$40	Harris
<i>Writing Center Journal</i>	\$10	\$15	\$15	Mullin
Membership + <i>WLN</i>	\$25	\$30	\$50	Pemberton
Membership + <i>WCJ</i>	\$20	\$25	\$25	Pemberton
Membership + <i>WLN + WCJ</i>	\$35	\$45	\$65	Pemberton

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- Frankel, Penny. *Building a Writing Center: From Idea to Identity (High School)*. Writing Center Consultants, 1490 West Fork, Lake Forest IL 60045

**National Directory:**

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# Untapped resources for training writing lab consultants

For writing lab directors, a new year begins not in the spring but in the fall with the training of new consultants and the upgrading of the returning consultants' skills. Certainly, fall training sessions are a pleasure, with new consultants bringing life and spirit into the lab while returning ones offer experience and wisdom.

And, as all lab directors also realize, training does not end with the fall of the leaves. Ongoing training is absolutely essential for building morale and confidence, for enhancing the consultants' knowledge, and for maintaining continuity. This training, like the need for water, is so vital for the life of a lab, that one might say directors are similar to dowsers who, with their divining rods of slippery elm, are ever searching for sources of water. However, if busy directors teach three or more courses, serve on campus-wide committees, and must grade Himalaya-high stacks of essays from their own classes, how can harassed, harried directors keep up the training during the academic year? With a touch of the dowsers' rod, and, of course, with some imagination, directors can find reservoirs of untapped resources for ongoing training.

A recurrent training goal is the need to build the morale of returning consultants. An excellent way to develop a sense of common purpose or dedication is for directors to have veteran consultants themselves conduct training sessions. Directors, for example, can ask several experienced consultants to provide advice on handling various populations of clients, such as helping freshmen writing papers on poetry, drama, or short stories. These showcased consultants report to their fellow workers what they do for students who use too much plot, not

enough analysis; what they do when they have not read the poem or play about which clients are writing; and what handouts they use with clients writing about literature. And if the lab is part of the certification program offered by the College Reading and Learning Association, these consultants can use their presentation as credit towards their certification (Devet, "National Certification"). In this way, experienced consultants feel they are helping themselves as well as fostering the needs of the lab.

Graduate consultants, too, can initiate their fellow workers into the lab's milieu. Bringing concepts from their own advanced classes, these students can tap into their graduate-level courses in the theory/practice of teaching composition in order to educate their fellow consultants. For instance, graduate students who have studied theories of cognition can use those ideas for describing invention techniques which their fellow consultants can employ with clients "stuck" for ideas. Or graduate consultants who have learned about the theories of how basic writers compose can explain to their fellow workers Mina Shaughnessy's concepts for assisting beginning writers. Obviously, using graduate consultants in this way not only lets them transfer theory to the real world of one-to-one consultations but also helps them to practice organizing a presentation, thereby increasing their morale and sense of worth. Besides, what more "peerless" source of information—the "peer" consultants, helping each other?

In what other ways can staff become a resource for training? If consultants are presenting papers at conferences, they need to gain confidence. An effective way to boost the ego is to have

them deliver their conference papers to the rest of the consultants. So, consultants' papers on helping international students or on writing-across-the-disciplines do double duty: training lab consultants and offering practice to the presenters before they "hit the boards" at their conference sessions. Speaking before their peers is, of course, much harder than giving the talk at the conference, but having received feedback from their fellow workers should dispel some of the conference goers' fears.

Another expressed goal of training is to educate consultants about the numerous resources available to them, for probably lining the lab's walls are textbooks (usually freebies from publishers) focusing on concerns germane to the clients' writing. Eager staff, wanting to expand their own repertoire of skills, can present in a staff meeting the central concepts from a book; later, the presenters can create a handout on that topic. A consultant can, for instance, report on Richard Lanham's *Revising Prose*, providing her fellow consultants with an overview of the textbook and suggestions for using its ideas with clients. In effect, the consultant increases her own knowledge as well as that of the rest of the staff.

Besides knowledge of resources, consultants also need to understand that labs serve a wider population than just students in English courses. To achieve this training goal, directors can turn to non-English faculty, inviting professors from diverse disciplines, such as history, business, sociology, and religious studies to a staff meeting in order to discuss the nature of writing in their own disciplines. When the history professor explains what his field considers to be proof versus what the sociology professor says her field sees

as evidence, consultants learn about various discourse communities. Besides the apparent benefit of educating consultants, faculty visits also let consultants meet professors face-to-face, improving communication between them and showing consultants how they do, indeed, work side-by-side with faculty from many disciplines.

After directors have worked so hard to foster morale and to educate consultants, one last ongoing goal of training is to establish continuity. All too soon, the day comes when consultants with well-earned experience and special talents depart. Although their departure would appear to break the unity, departing consultants are, paradoxically, a resource to create continuity. Before they leave, directors can ask them to write down two or three pieces of advice they would give new consultants, advice focusing on handling day-to-day concerns or on dealing with specific types of clients

(Devet, ““O, Admirable Consultant”). Such advice is often diverse but always helpful, such as the following pearl of wisdom about the emotional support consultants need as they deal with clients. As one departing consultant wrote,

Be patient with yourself. . . . If you are not sure about something or do not know where to find an answer, ask another consultant. Do not feel discouraged when you do not know something. One of the greatest benefits of the Writing Lab is that both clients and consultants can learn from their time there. Or the advice can be directed to a specific problem which an experienced consultant has solved: Don't let the client force you into writing the thesis statement by staring blankly at the page for long periods of time. Remember that when you say 'something like this,' the client will write your suggestion down as if it's the only correct way to do it.

Then, these pieces of advice—like time capsules to the future— can be collected into a notebook that is readily available for all consultants to read. By doing so, directors not only create continuity between groups of consultants but also evoke the special voices and views that only peer consultants as veterans of the trenches can provide.

Like dowsers with their divining rods of slippery elm, lab directors must seek out waters so necessary for ongoing training. The dowsed waters of the training sessions, conference presentations, useful textbooks, faculty visits, and advice from departing consultants should be deep reservoirs for developing the skills of consultants and for sustaining the labs themselves.

Bonnie Devet  
College of Charleston  
Charleston, SC

### Works Cited

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THE WRITING LAB  
NEWSLETTER

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