

# THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E T T E R

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Promoting the exchange of voices and ideas in one-to-one teaching of writing May, 2000

## ...FROM THE EDITOR...

As this academic year winds down, so does the newsletter. Our last issue for the 1999-2000 academic year will be next month's June issue. (We start off the next year with the September issue.) Because some of us (the more conscientious, organized types) will, no doubt, soon be starting to write the yearly report, Sara Kimball's article is particularly timely as she offers us useful insights into rhetorical approaches when reporting on our yearly work. She also gives us a framework for doing strategic planning for next year.

One bit of planning you might want to do is to consider using Hugh Pettis's questionnaire at the start of tutorials (see page 11), and Joan Mullin and Michael A. Pemberton offer a review of a book you may want to add to your summer reading list.

Because some of us are also planning budgets for next year, it would be very useful to know dates and locations of forthcoming writing center-related and tutoring conferences. Please send information about conferences for 2000-2001 as soon as possible.

• Muriel Harris, editor

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## Yikes! I'm running a business

My title recalls a series of minor epiphanies I've had over the past three years running the Undergraduate Writing Center at the University of Texas at Austin. Although I thought I had reconciled myself to having become an administrator, I'd never thought of myself as a business person. I do, however, come from a family of business people. My brother and sister have MBAs, and my father's B.A. is in business. My grandfather owned a construction company that built roads and campgrounds in northern New England during the 30's and 40's. After he died, my grandmother ran a small company consolidated out of one of his construction jobs that moved pulpwood for a paper company in Maine.

So I don't think of business as alien. Some of my childhood memories are of business matters. I remember driving with my grandmother to the paper mill when she went to deliver the payroll checks and talk things over with her foreman. I remember her preparing the payroll each week. I also remember my mother talking about some of the decisions she made—for example her decision to buy a new crane—when she took over the business many years later after my grandmother became incapacitated.

I've begun to realize that I have been making many of the same kinds of decisions about hiring, equipment purchases, and the general direction in which things should go that my grandmother and my mother made in running their business. And that is a kind of epiphany for someone who is perhaps the world's least numerically-oriented person—someone whose eyes glaze over when the rest of her family starts talking about the stock market.

Like my grandmother's business, my writing center provides a service rather

than producing a product. Unlike my grandmother's business, however, the UT writing center is not an independent entity. Instead, it's more like a subsidiary within the larger corporate structure of the university. With a staff of approximately sixty graduate and undergraduate consultants who work from five to twenty hours a week, we're about the size of many small businesses. Our budget, generated by a fee of \$7 that each UT undergraduate pays each semester he or she is enrolled, is approximately half a million dollars each year. We use about \$400,000 of this each year, the bulk of which goes to paying staff salaries, and we keep approximately \$100,000 in reserve as a cushion against mandated staff pay raises.

Our administrative structure replicates that of many businesses. Our coordinator, Elisabeth Piedmont-Marton, acts as full-time, on-site manager. She is responsible for day-to-day operations, normal purchasing of supplies, and publicity. She advises faculty teaching writing-intensive courses and has responsibility jointly with me for hiring decisions, policy, and staff training. We also have an administrative assistant who acts as chief receptionist, maintains our electronic records database, works on clerical tasks such as mass mailings to faculty, and takes care of our computer network.

As director, I function as CEO. My responsibilities include making policy and launching and seeing through major initiatives, such as electronic consulting and outreach to faculty teaching writing-intensive courses. I also initiate major purchases. For example, when we bought a network server, I did the initial research and conducted negotiations with sales representatives. One of the nice things about being CEO, though, is that other people get to handle the details of paperwork and setup.

The most important part of my job, however, is to represent our writing center and its interests to various con-

stituencies within the university, including students, administrators, and my colleagues on the faculty. I'm responsible for reporting, describing, explaining, and—if necessary—defending my writing center before various audiences. I write an annual report, a task that includes reviewing and interpreting statistics kept in our electronic database, collecting, keeping, and organizing information about staff activities, and then turning this raw data into an organized, readable, and professional-looking whole. Writing the annual report requires about as much effort each summer as a major research paper and calls on many of the same intellectual skills. It also requires math—or at least arithmetic—which my scholarly research, fortunately, does not.

Like any intelligent business, our writing center pays attention to publicity and to its public image. We've tried to be strategic in our thinking about publicity. When students make their first visits, they're asked a series of questions for our records, including "How did you find out about us?" This is the sort of question we're all familiar with from dealings with some kinds of businesses. By far the most common source of information about our writing center is classroom teachers, though word of mouth among students has been gaining steadily. We make deliberate efforts, therefore, to target faculty in our publicity. For example, at the beginning of each semester, we send mass mailings to faculty describing our services and including sample brochures.

We make other efforts at publicity as well—for example, posters displayed prominently in locations where students congregate. We also pay as much attention to how our writing center is portrayed in the student, university, and local media as any corporation pays to its media image. Elisabeth Piedmont-Marton, our coordinator, has been featured in *The Austin American-Statesman*, Austin's newspaper, and has appeared on a couple of local tv

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Editor: Muriel Harris; Asst. to the Editor: Mary Jo Turley, English Dept., Purdue University, 1356 Heavilon, West Lafayette, IN 47907-1356 (765)494-7268. e-mail: harrism@cc.purdue.edu mjturley@purdue.edu

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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).

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shows in connection with her work on our grammar hotline.

We also try to be proactive and head off negative publicity. The summer after our fee was approved, for example, there was some griping in the student newspaper about yet another fee. Fees are volatile politically on our campus, and it was important to let students know what they were getting for their money. Early that fall, I wrote an op-ed column for the student newspaper, taking the position that although nobody likes a new fee, few fees are as good a bargain as the writing center fee, and describing the services that we would be offering now that we had adequate funding. I noted that our writing center could offer a much better deal than our competitors, private tutorial services who charge more than three times our fee for a single hour of less reliable service. This wasn't Exxon or Mobil taking out a full-page ad in *The New York Times*, but the proactive approach seems to have worked. Since then, there have been no complaints about the fee in the student newspaper and few elsewhere.

Like a responsible business, our writing center tries to be highly accountable: we pay attention to the interests of our stakeholders and to quality control. *Accountability* is sometimes a dirty word in academia: it should be if the responsibility is one-sided—if, for example, calls for increased faculty accountability mask a community's reluctance to take responsibility by funding its university system adequately. But that's not the situation in which my writing center finds itself. Our budget is both generous and flexible. It's just common sense that we should respond to our good fortune by adopting highly professional practices and by making sure that our various stakeholders—the people for whom we provide a service and the people with whom we do business—know we are doing so.

The concept of stakeholders comes from strategic planning. These are the

people who—as the name implies—have some sort of stake in a business or non-profit enterprise. Stakeholders include not only customers or shareholders, but also employees and the individuals and entities with whom one does business, for example, people who supply a company with goods and services, or collaborators on a project (Bryson 27). A company that deals with its stakeholders responsibly can normally expect reciprocal support.

Our writing center's stakeholders include not only the students who use our services, but also the consultants who work there, faculty, administrators, and the other people on campus with whom we work, such as the staff of the library in which we are located. The UT administration is well aware of our writing center's value from a public relations point of view. Our dean, for example, has sent copies of our annual report and our newsletter to alumni groups. Sometimes, we find ourselves reminding our stakeholders about the benefits of associating with us, for example making it clear to graduate consultants that working in the writing center not only provides income to support their studies, it also provides credentials on a vita. Sometimes it's useful to invoke the interests of one set of stakeholders in dealing with another. For example, in negotiating for increased space, I have found it helpful to remind competitors for the space that the administration finds the writing center valuable for public relations.

Our commitment to dealing honestly and explicitly with our stakeholders is both ethical and practical. Students should know how we are spending their money. Faculty should have a clear sense of how we work with their students, and if our dean is going to support us, he needs accurate information. Since we are supported by a mandatory fee, our obligations in reporting are closer to those of a public corporation than they are to those of a small, privately-held company. Our annual report functions in much the same way

as the annual report a business sends to its stockholders or a non-profit to its contributors, although its style derives more from my academic training than from any corporate model. The annual report is a publicly available document. We don't hide it from anyone who shows up at the center asking for it, and we have made each year's copy available on our Web site (<http://uwc.fac.utexas.edu/about/report/index.html>).

We provide a service rather than a product, so quality control does not mean inspecting and testing something. It does, however, mean attention to what we are doing and how we are doing it of the sort that is practiced by responsible and successful businesses. And this is a kind of practice that should not be alien to responsible and successful teachers. The practices we have adopted are similar to those of Total Quality Management (TQM), though most had been implemented before I ever read much about TQM. The emphasis is as much on process as on product, and our system of self-evaluation solicits and acts upon feedback from customers, stakeholders, and employees (Capezio and Morehouse 1-26). We survey students who visit our center, faculty whose students use our services, and consultants, asking about what is going well and what could use improvement and soliciting concrete suggestions. We report the results of these surveys in our annual report (warts and all) and we try to act on them. Where criticisms are well-founded and realistic, we try to improve; when they're not, we respond with education. For example, it seems clear from last year's faculty survey that we need to do more to explain to faculty the linguistic and social challenges that international students face, and we need to help some faculty make their own expectations of the results of a single writing center session a bit more realistic.

We also have a system of self-evaluation of consultations. Each consultant is responsible for having at least two

sessions observed by a colleague who writes a short report that is put into a file. The guidelines for the observations were produced by the consultants themselves (after a certain amount of insistence on my part), and we have revised and emended the system a couple of times. I'm not naive enough to suppose that these reports provide an empirically reliable picture of consultants' total practice; they have to be considered part of a larger picture that includes the student and faculty surveys, statistical analyses of visits, and qualitative analyses of consultants' reports on sessions. I do, however, think that much of the value of such observations lies in the message they send to consultants: that it is important to pay attention to one's practice—to observe what's going well and try to replicate it and to improve what needs improvement. We have, for example, used consultants' observations in revising our staff handbook and in staff training. The process of observing is itself a way of spreading knowledge, since it acquaints consultants with the techniques their colleagues use.

There are some obvious ways in which our writing center differs from a small business. Unlike my grandmother, for example, I don't deal directly with the IRS or OSHA; the university does this for me. I don't sit down and do the payroll each week, and I don't pay rent for the space in which the writing center operates. I have no control over my prices and little control over staff salaries. The reason we keep a budgetary reserve, for example, is that if the legislature mandates a raise for graduate students, staff, or even faculty, we have to eat that increase without being able to raise our prices. But I think the biggest difference between my writing center and a business is that most of my employees are students, and I have responsibilities to them as a teacher, in addition to my responsibilities as CEO to run the place efficiently and creatively.

In part, this means making sure that their interests are represented. For example, we will not hire graduate students on an hourly basis, appointing them for 19 or fewer hours just so we can get out of paying them benefits—and benefits are a big bite out of the budget. That's not only shortsighted, crummy business practice, it would also be an abdication of my responsibility as a faculty member to provide for students.

As a faculty administrator I am also obliged to understand that one of my employees' jobs is to learn. Part of the service my writing center offers the university is the opportunity for its student employees to acquire experience and credentials. I try not only to set expectations for my staff, but also to indicate how they can benefit from working in the writing center. I also to try make connections between our work in the center and current issues in academia, matters like accountability or how to be a scholar when you also have demands on your time and energy in teaching and service.

Sometimes projects don't get completed as quickly or as efficiently as they might by a staff with more experience, but I think we can count people's acquisition of experience in working on projects as positive achievements. We try to include some sense of who learned what in assessments of our center's accomplishments. I try to be very clear in the annual report that part of what I am describing is my staff's progress as students—whether it's the work of talented undergraduates learning to critique and explain writing or the work of thoughtful graduate students learning a variety of approaches to teaching in the writing center and the classroom.

*Business* is another dirty word in academia—and sometimes it should be. But my model is not the large, ruthless and rootless multinational that exploits its employees and their commu-

nity. Nor am I talking about ill-digested concepts from popular management strategies foisted by administrators upon reluctant faculty. My model is instead a smaller business that's rooted in a community, one that respects its customers and employees as intelligent human beings and achieves quality by protecting its workers' interests, a business that has a sense of responsibility because it is part of a community.

That may seem highly idealistic, but sometimes it works out in practice. I spent some time in Massachusetts last fall, where the big news story was the reopening of Malden Mills, the textile factory that makes Polartec, a fabric used in outdoor clothing. The mill burned down two years ago at Christmas, but the owner pledged not to abandon Lawrence, the city in which the mill was located, but to rebuild and to keep people on the payroll while doing so. By all accounts, Malden Mills has acted as an ethical business and a responsible member of its community—and they produce a high-quality product.

... I'd like to think we are doing something similar at UT Austin.

Sara E. Kimball  
University of Texas  
Austin, TX

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## 'Am I really a peer?': Dilemmas of collaboration for the tutor with work experience

The girl I'm tutoring is telling me about her wild social life—the clubs she goes to, the boys she dates, the boys she wants to date. I'm listening to her and wondering how to respond. I feel like I can't really tell her my Friday night plans: 'Well, my husband's making pasta for dinner.' I mean, am I really this student's peer?

-Kyra

Kyra's query, voiced during a semester-long tutor training seminar, sets the stage for this essay, which looks at the problems encountered by older students when they begin to tutor. I will focus specifically on the tensions that arose for three tutors who have written or edited professionally. I am attending to tutors with this experience because it is not unusual to get such tutors with this background in the writing center. Their experience makes them desirable tutors, and yet they also encounter specific problems when confronted with the collaborative processes expounded by writing centers. This is especially pertinent to those of us at large, urban, public universities where returning students are more numerous. But in reality, problems with the peer role are accentuated in older tutors, but not unique to them. While there has been some attention to older students as writing center *clients*, little attention has been paid to older students as *tutors* (see Haynes-Burton). My aim here is to draw question marks around the cherished writing center values of peerness and collaboration because I think that is what is needed to enrich our work with a more diverse student *and* tutor population.

### The students

The three students whose experiences I am discussing are Brad, Greta, and Lizette. These students demonstrated three different responses as they transitioned from the ideologies and

practices of the workplace to those of tutoring.

I have found myself almost self-deprecatingly referring to my professional experience in order not to intimidate writers in a tutoring session. (By the way, if they don't ask, I don't tell, anything.) I have to admit to the occasional temptation to want to demystify some of what they're learning and say something like "Look, you need to know how to write this kind of a research paper because, believe it or not, no matter what job you have, you might actually be asked to write something very similar, and then what are you going to tell your boss, that you're not interested? That you're not sufficiently inspired? That you don't like the topic?" The adult in me wants to play Scrooge and take them to visit the ghost-of-workdays-future and show them exactly how easy their present-day task is. Sure, I want to slap 'em and say "Wake up!" But, I can't, and I wouldn't.

-Brad

Brad was in his late 30s when he came to our Writing Center. Having formerly worked as editor in commodities research and advertising, he found that rather than being useful, his workplace culture conflicted with the new, academic setting he was immersed in. He thought deeply about the process model he was being introduced to and agreed with it in principle. But because of the hierarchical modes he had imbibed in the advertising and commodities industries, Brad had to struggle to make the dialogical, process model work for himself *despite* his work experience.

My inquiries began with Brad because I identified with him. I am currently an assistant director of the Writing Center at the University of Illinois

at Chicago (UIC), and in this position I am responsible for training students in a tutor-training seminar. I believe that we will improve our tutoring services by recruiting and retaining a broader range of tutors. But I am also a graduate student—someone who returned to graduate school after nine years in various writing positions. My own editorial experience most frequently called for a hands-on, intrusive kind of editing in environments where edicts came top-down. Even though my first teaching assignment involved teaching what I had been doing—writing—the pedagogical setting required a major attitude adjustment. I was good at editing and telling people what to do; figuring out ways to have students get there for themselves seemed alien and even counterproductive—after all, students often didn't choose the most efficient routes.

I do have a lot in mind after I read something. And I struggle with the idea of what I have in mind, and the idea of letting things happen the way that they just, you know, just letting them happen in the session . . . any way that they may go. Because you know, when I am in that journalistic frame of mind, if somebody gives you a piece of work, you think about it and then you see what's most important, who is this going out to, how does it need to be fixed, and then fix it, and that's it. And in these sessions, when I read a paper, I'm thinking that way. I'm going to think that way, that's the way that I think. I don't really catch myself, I don't have to catch myself, it's not that bad, but I do already have an idea of what should happen so I know that I'm being directive in that way.

-Greta

Greta's journalistic experience led her to the same frustrations I had encountered when I first began to work

with student writers. She was in her late 20s when she came to the writing center; and although she had only worked as a reporter for a brief time, she over-identified with her workplace training. She did not see or acknowledge a distinction between the environment of the workplace and that of the writing center. Tutoring, like editing, was “one-to-one teaching”—and she insisted on calling her writing center work “teaching.” In her sessions she focused on product over process. She had no doubts that she knew how to write better than tutees and was certain she could help them by imparting this knowledge. Her tutoring approach was to ask a series of questions that would ultimately lead to *her* preconceived method of correcting the problems *she* had identified.

No matter what level the person I’m working with is on, no matter how old they are, or what classes they’re seeking help with, I really try to focus on meaning in whether they’re making their points clear. And by doing that I can . . . still address grammar issues that I feel are important because the important grammar issues are the ones that do affect meaning. . . . That seems more true to my experience in the workplace because if I couldn’t tell somebody why they should change some aspect of their grammar based on meaning or context, it wouldn’t fly with them. They’d be offended in the workplace or they’d think I was just trying to show them up or they’d think it was just irrelevant.

- Lizette

Lizette found a balance between her work and academic experiences. In effect, she was bicultural, able to negotiate between the two. Lizette succeeded at capitalizing on her expertise in not only editing but also interpersonal dynamics. She comprehended the working and academic worlds as two distinct realms, and had learned to adapt what she found appropriate and reject what was not. She spoke at length

about the differences involved in working with clients as a customer service representative, and in working with typesetters and editors as a production editor for a book publisher. Working in both settings had taught her how to collaborate and negotiate with different personality types, and to deal with grammar problems some people tended to see as unimportant by focusing on meaning. These skills nicely translated to tutoring.

### The dilemmas

All three tutors exhibited different modes and levels of adjustment from the workplace. Nevertheless, all of them also faced dilemmas which can be categorized as problems with collaboration and peerness.

### Collaboration

The workplace prepared these students for both multiple and anonymous authorship in much more profound ways than their academic and writing center experiences. As a customer service representative for a computer software firm, Lizette produced a manual that was an edited compilation of numerous employees’ written tip sheets. It was frowned upon if a writer’s name was on these sheets or on the completed manual. Lizette explained, “When you leave, your work belongs to [the company], and a lot of the items that I worked on and I felt really proud of because I made real progress on are floating around still without my name on [them]. It’s a different idea of ownership. It’s not so egocentric, I guess. They didn’t care who wrote what, they just wanted results.” This results-focused attitude is very different from what Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede call “dialogic collaboration,” which is the *de facto* model for tutoring sessions. According to Lunsford and Ede, in “dialogic collaboration,” “the process of articulating goals is often as important as the goals themselves and sometimes even more important. Furthermore, those participating in dialogic collaboration generally value the creative tension inherent in multivoiced and multivalent ventures” (133).

In contrast, in the workplace product was almost always valued over process. Nevertheless, the workplace often seemed to be *more* collaborative than tutor-student relationships. Now an aspiring secondary teacher, Lizette’s corporate experience led her to question the collaborative models that were presented to her as a writing center tutor. She explained: “[With] the structure of the Writing Center, I personally think it’s kind of impossible to have real collaboration because it’s not two people in the same setting working on the same thing; it’s somebody coming for advice.” As Lizette pointed out, tutors’ and students’ levels of investment in conferenced papers are not equivalent. Only one of their names will appear on the essay.

Greta’s work in a variety of journalistic positions also accustomed her to subtly shaded definitions of authorship. Working one-on-one with an editor could sometimes mirror the writing center conferences she later participated in as a tutor, but it could also mean her work would be changed without her knowledge or consent—even though bylines were immensely important in her field. This flies in the face of our academic expectations that the paper will be written by the student alone, in her own, authentic voice, not a mimic of the tutor’s, teacher’s, or editor’s. Further, in one of her journalistic positions, researcher for the *Chicago Reporter*, Greta’s job was to gather and organize ideas that would go into a story someone else would write. “Half the time I was gathering information [and] I didn’t even know how it would be used,” she said. Greta and Lizette encountered co-writing situations that were more collaborative than many writing center conferences. Even more significantly, they also encountered ideologies of authorship that not only defied the single author model, but also challenged the importance of *any* author claiming public responsibility for a written text.

### Peerness

Despite their positive experience

with workplace collaboration, these tutors all had trouble using the authority of these experiences in a peer “dominated” environment.

Experience with workplace collaborative authorship had provided these individuals with confidence in their own expertise and authority. In their jobs they had learned how their writing conformed and contrasted with other writers’ work. However, transferred to the tutoring session, these very qualities of expertise and authority became troublesome. These tutors had difficulty assimilating their considerable experience to their understanding of what it meant to be a peer. Our writing center philosophy promotes helping students think of writing solutions for themselves; tutors of all ages respond to this philosophy by worrying about appropriating students’ papers by telling them too much. This dilemma seems to be especially burdensome for former writers and editors whose sense of authority and legitimacy as tutors comes from the possession of expertise. Tutors with professional writing backgrounds usually have an especially decisive response to students’ writing. They are more confident in their opinions of writing and more cognizant of a community of writers that agrees with their views. Yet, in response to the perceived need to not give away answers, these tutors silence themselves, holding back their special knowledge.

John Tassoni writes, “Once the context of secrecy is established, [the tutor’s] hope for a productive dialogue diminishes” (201). Yet, in varying degrees, all three students experienced tutoring as infused with secrecy, through the withholding of information. Irene Lurkis Clark implies that this, in fact, is what writing centers endorse in our repeated cautions to not appropriate the papers of fledgling writers. Questioning the way in which this has become a “thou shalt not” sort of edict, Clark asks, “Should tutors always withhold information about other possible directions for a text for fear of

appropriating the student’s text?” (86). Greta articulates precisely this struggle when she says she knows immediately exactly how to “fix” a student paper but also insists that she doesn’t have to “catch” herself. And withholding information is what Brad describes—even prescribes—in his “don’t ask/don’t tell” policy. When Brad concluded the comment from the paper quoted above with, “Sure, I want to slap ‘em and say ‘Wake up!’ But, I can’t, and I wouldn’t,” it prompted wide-eyed marginal comments from my colleague Mary Zajac and me, who were co-teaching the course. Why, we asked, “couldn’t and wouldn’t” he enlighten students in this manner? Surely, “demystifying” was precisely what tutors should do—even according to writing center orthodoxy. Yet I don’t think Brad was misreading the tutoring theory we had been discussing, or that Mary and I hadn’t adequately done our jobs of dispelling myths about the tutor’s role. Rather, he was caught in a very real bind: if he was to take seriously the first term in the phrase “peer tutoring,” then he had to hide certain aspects of who he was, and pretend to relate to students on a level he really didn’t embody.

Sometimes such dilemmas can lead to productive discussions about stretching the boundaries of the word “peer.” But the problem is not resolved by mere redefinition. Lizette recalled an incident shortly after she returned to school when a friend—a peer who was not a writing center client—asked her to review a personal statement for graduate school. “What I did was edit it like I would one of the books I was working with and I was thinking that would be really helpful for her,” she said. Afterwards, she realized she had “probably stepped on her toes” with this strategy. Reconsidering what the friend had really wanted despite her instructions to “mark it up,” Lizette realized that she had been *too* authoritative. While publications required finding *all* errors, working with people in a learning environment necessitated prioritizing and selecting *key* errors.

“So . . . afterwards, I think she was wanting specific commentary but I don’t think she was wanting the amount that I gave her. I gave her *a lot* of feedback. I think maybe she was looking for a few key points, and . . . I overwhelmed her.”

Like Brad, Lizette also struggled with how to be a peer to what she called “younger writers” and finally resolved it by rejecting the peer role in some situations: “I try to be collaborative, but I feel more of a need to balance some degree of responsibility because I am older. And in order to do that I have to impose some degree of ‘OK, this isn’t my peer, I do have some world experiences that might benefit her in some ways. Whereas if I were to see it as a complete peer collaboration, I wouldn’t feel comfortable doing that.” Lizette’s sense of responsibility to younger writers overshadowed the need to appear as an equal, since she felt they would really benefit from some of her world experiences. If she were to act as peer to these writers, she would have to say less, as she had learned in her encounter with her friend. Even so, despite her new, nonpeer role, Lizette still voiced the need to withhold expertise: “[T]here’s a realization that it’s their paper, you’re to step back. Like I make suggestions, but I’m very conscious when I do. I’m hesitant to suggest too much.”

### What can we do?

How can we help such tutors so that they don’t feel they have to silence themselves to be peers? How can we help resolve the dilemmas of collaboration that they face? My first suggestion is also my most practical, in that we can each attempt to enact it—tomorrow, if we like. We need to find out our tutors’ collaborative and workplace experiences, help them see their past work in the context of academic collaboration, and help them to both use and critique these experiences in the writing center. My example here is a negative one, in the sense that I didn’t fully succeed in the task I’m advocating. As a teacher I saw my responsibility to Greta as encouraging more self-reflective critique

of the workplace values and strategies she brought to the center, but I was only partly successful. Toward the end of the summer semester Greta began to voice the worry in her journal entries that she might be directing students too much. Her final paper voiced a philosophy that seemed to counteract her initial “fix it” urge: “Don’t assume anything. Don’t assume that what worked for your last student will work for the next. Don’t assume that you are as good as you can be. Don’t assume that you can’t help. Don’t assume that they won’t learn. Don’t assume that they don’t care. Most of all, don’t assume what will happen.” But Greta’s tutoring approach remained the same. And even while she considered that her authority as tutor might make someone accept her thesis as more valid than his or her own, for example, she did not consider that the very nature of her relation to others would constitute much of the “lesson” students would learn.

Next, we should rethink our assertions that academic collaboration will help prepare students for workplace collaboration. My professional experience has made me skeptical toward claims that the collaborative processes we introduce in our classrooms and writing centers are beneficial to students who will join a team-oriented working world upon graduation. Kenneth Bruffee voices such a claim when he asserts, “In business and industry . . . and in professions such as medicine, law, engineering, and architecture, where to work is to learn or fail, collaboration is the norm” (14). He then goes on to argue for writing center collaboration as a precursor to such work experience. But there are too many different kinds of collaboration. Despite its many guises, academic collaboration does not always prepare one for workplace collaboration. Neither does workplace collaboration make for a smooth entry in the university. I would like us to extend the work begun by Lunsford and Ede in *Singular Texts/Plural Authors*, and more closely ex-

amine the kinds of collaborative strategies our tutors bring with them from the workplace, and consider how these relate to and differ from our own collaborative ideals.

Third, we can reconsider our attitudes toward collaborative and single authorship. These students’ workplace experiences with co-writing, ghostwriting, and researching for others’ writing should make us question our community’s assumptions about authoring. It should especially make us aware of the confusion we perpetrate when we insist upon single authorship at the same time as we expound upon the benefits of collaboration.

Finally, we need to rethink peer philosophy, and situate it in discussions of power and aggression. Certainly, one response I hope my essay prompts is that, as Clark has urged, we continue to question our dogma, such as the efficacy of peer philosophies in all tutoring settings. Is peerness crucial to tutoring? John Trimbur’s suggestion that we train tutors to be peers first and, later, tutors (or experts) makes sense given the hierarchical models of education most tutors have encountered, so that peer training begins to undo hierarchical assumptions and helps students become “co-learners” (24). This has the best chance of working with those who do not already possess the authority of expertise. But some of our tutors, especially those with work experience, *do* possess expertise, as well as a “strategic ego center outside their experience as peers and tutors” that Trimbur denies them (25). Is it fair to request someone who is thirty-something and has been paid to write to assume a peer role? One intriguing alternative has been proposed by Linda Shamon and Deborah Burns, who offer the musician’s “master class” as a positive model for emulative, directive tutoring (140). We need more such options that can give our experienced tutors a broader range of alternatives than “peer” currently provides.

The reason that Lizette succeeded at shifting between peer and authority, at being bicultural, was because she approached new cultures such as the writing center by thinking about her own place within a complex system of power relations. From her business exposure Lizette knew how to be a peer who is not a peer, a complicated role that might come more easily in the working world where the ground rules and hierarchies are usually more explicit. Workers who call one another by first names still know who reports to whom and who signs the paychecks. In writing centers these roles are less clear. Yet the problem is not so much that our nonhierarchical writing center philosophies are lodged in intensely hierarchical institutions, although this is certainly true. More important is the recognition that “peerness” is a complicated relation that involves power and even aggression as well as equality. In her final course paper, Kyra answered her own question about whether she was really a peer. Reflecting on Kenneth Bruffee’s description of tutoring as a conversation of “status equals or peers” (8), she wrote:

As I evolved as a tutor, I learned that maintaining the “equal status” dictated by Bruffee was virtually impossible. I let go of Bruffee’s notion, and as I contemplated the dynamics of human relationships, I realized that in a conversation, authority, power, and control were inevitable. But, to have a really productive and fulfilling conversation, these elements needed to be shared. Sharing power and control, however, do not translate to “peerness” as tutor and tutee do not share at the same time, but give and take power. -Kyra

Not just older tutors, but all tutors, as well as tutor trainers can benefit from what Kyra learned: to re-situate discussions about collaboration and peerness within the locus of discussions about power and authority.

Julie A. Bokser  
University of Illinois at Chicago  
Chicago, IL



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## Writing Coordinator, Learning Center Knox College Galesburg, IL

This is a full-time, twelve month appointment. Start date is August 1, 2000.

*Responsibilities:*

With the Director, coordinates the daily activities, operation, and development of the Learning Center, including assistance in the recruitment, training, supervision, evaluation, and certification of student peer tutors (which requires some weekend and late evening hours). The Writing Coordinator offers one-to-one and group tutorial instruction in English composition, teaches one course a year, and assists the Director in consultation with the faculty and staff to improve writing across the curriculum.

*Qualifications:*

M.A. in English, English Literature, Linguistics, Applied Linguistics, Comparative Literature, Composition and Rhetoric, or closely related equivalent; a minimum of three years teaching composition at the post-secondary level; familiarity with contemporary theories of composition and rhetoric; proficiency in Microsoft Word, Excel, Power

Point, Internet, and email systems; exceptionally strong oral and written communication skills; and the ability to work well with a variety of constituencies in a small college environment.

For information on Knox College and a complete job description, visit the Knox College website: <http://www.knox.edu/jobs>.

Review of applications will begin immediately and continue until the position is filled. Send resume, appropriate college and graduate school transcripts, three letters of recommendation which speak directly to the Writing Coordinator position, and a letter elaborating upon your qualifications for this position to:

John Haslem, PhD  
Director, Knox College  
Learning Center  
Attn: Writing Coordinator  
Search Box 77  
Knox College  
Galesburg, IL 61401-4999

## Calendar for Writing Centers Associations

Sept. 28-30: Midwest Writing Centers Association, in Minneapolis, MN  
**Contact:** either Suzanne M. Swiderski at <sswid@loras.edu> or Larry D. Harred at <larry.d.harred@uwrf.edu>

November 2-4, 2000. National Writing Centers Association in conjunction with the Mid-Atlantic Writing Centers Association, in Baltimore, MD. Conference website: <http://www.english.udel.edu/wc/mawca/nwcacon.html>

## Quotable Tutor Quote

**"When we enthusiastically become part of the learning process with writers, the questions we ask will be genuine and the discoveries we make with the writers will be real."**

John Verbos  
Washington College  
Chestertown, MD

# TUTORS' COLUMN

## Sampling silence

The notion of a brief questionnaire came to me off the WCenter listserv last winter. Why not engage the student with a few questions on a form surveying reading and writing habits while I read over the composition? Let the questions be non-threatening in tone, general in scope, and potentially helpful as reminders of what personal habits underlie sound writing.

Tutoring undergraduates in the Writing Center (at the University of Maryland in College Park) for some years now, I have tried various ice-breaking devices (ploys?) to get myself and client tuned to the same wavelength. Usually the student comes in to have a composition patched up, “fixed.” My focus as tutor starts with the student, not simply a fetched-in draft. I want the student to see herself or himself as Writer, not someone or something else. If rapport can be established on this wavelength early in the hour’s session, the two of us as fellow writers can handle the composition—warts and all—as the locus of a useful learning experience.

Without attempting to construct a formal research endeavor, I tossed off a 16-question, check-the-box survey form titled “Some Questions for You as a Writer”(see page 11). The first six questions assayed personal-pleasure reading habits—frequency, where, choices, and favorite author. The next six queried the nature of the client’s approach to writing for pleasure—outlines, implements, time management, first draft disposition. The final four questions simply touched on the draft itself for argument, thesis point, audience, and construction.

Although I handed out about 50 of my rough questionnaires over one semester (skipping over students coming in just to explore assignments), I have no data-laden statistics to display; the clients carried off their completed forms (my intention). I can pass along, however, some general observations about the responses encountered. Doubtless no surprise to other tutors and composition/rhetoric folk, my rough observations at least underscore what we all know about the role of habit in pleasurable reading as a catalyst for fearless writing.

Concerning pleasure-reading habits: respondents could be categorized as “Never,” “Could name a frequently read magazine,” or “Had a favorite author.” The Nevers usually had the most troublesome drafts—fuzzy concepts, indeterminate style, awkward constructions. Of the readers for pleasure (I’d guess about a third of the number), those who could name a frequently-read magazine presented somewhat smoother, better-crafted drafts. Tutoring this second category tended to develop emphasis on examining rhetoric and adjusting style.

Anne Tyler, Max Lucado, and (gasp) Henry Miller were among authors listed by the third category of clients, those who named a favorite writer. I’d guess about one of ten of my students claimed a favorite. These sessions were invariably stimulating and productive, ending all too soon. Here remediation usually focused on argument and compositional balance. Such sessions tended to be more mentoring in character than prescriptively tutorial (and invariably produced return appointments, an unsurprising outcome to the “us writers” approach).

Students with a favorite author reflected a more experienced response to first-draft disposal and time management: “Revise/rewrite” or “throw it away,” two to three days before deadline. The middle reading-habit cohort (naming a frequently read publication) tended more to the “hand it in” choice—get it over and done with. Those least habituated to reading for pleasure tended, as writers, to the choices of “correct mistakes” or “bring it to the Writing Center” (the latter placed on the questionnaire simply for laughs, but one never knows).

The final question on the survey called for the student to rank the relative importance of argument, style, grammar, and appearance of the assigned composition. The student’s estimation usually (and nicely) would lead into a comfortable and useful dialogue. I could build on the one ranked #1 and segue into what most needed collaborative effort, both of us now humming along on the same wavelength.

The little survey form did give me three or so minutes to read over the draft silently while the student busily bared a literary soul. We were, you might say, coming together in time, mind, and focus, and I could go about initiating an “us writers” dialogue. Just as small children learn speech from hearing, so writing well seems to follow habituated reading. My little survey ploy suggests that reading for pleasure is an important gateway to writing with confidence—and success.

Hugh S. Pettis  
University of Maryland  
College Park, MD

### ***SOME QUESTIONS FOR YOU AS A WRITER***

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1. Do you read much for personal enjoyment?  
 **Yes**     **No**
  
2. What kind?
  
3. Where?
  
4. How often?  
 **daily**     **weekly**     **maybe monthly**     **occasionally**
  
5. Do you have a favorite author?  
 **Yes**     **No**    **Who?**
  
6. Do you regularly read a magazine?  
 **Yes**     **No**    **Which one?**
  
7. How much do you enjoy writing?  
 **not much**     **somewhat**     **a lot**
  
8. Do you ever write for your own pleasure?  **Yes**     **No**    **If so, usually what?**  
 **diary**     **journal**     **letters**     **poems**     **stories**     **other**
  
9. How firm an outline, if any, do you develop before starting to write?  
 **none**     **main points only**     **detailed (e.g. by paragraph)**
  
10. Which writing instrument do you usually (and initially) use?  
 **pen/pencil**     **typewriter**     **word processor/computer**
  
11. How far in advance of an assignment's due-date do you begin to write?  
 **the night before**     **2-3 days before**     **a week before**
  
12. What do you usually do with a first draft?  
 **correct mistakes**     **revise/rewrite**     **throw it away**     **hand it in**  
 **bring it to the Writing Center**
  
13. What's your argument in today's assignment?
  
14. Is your paper written for a particular audience?  
 **Yes**     **No**     **Maybe**
  
15. Where would they find and read your paper, for example?
  
16. How would you rank the following elements of a composition in order of importance?  
 **Argument**     **Style**     **Grammar**     **Appearance**

## Book Review

*Writing Centers and Writing Across the Curriculum Programs: Building Interdisciplinary Partnerships.* Ed. Robert W. Barnett and Jacob S Blumner. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1999. \$55

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Reviewed by Joan Mullin (University of Toledo, Toledo, OH) and Michael A. Pemberton (Georgia Southern University, Statesboro, GA)

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One of the claims made by the editors of this collection is that the contributors, despite their diversity in institutional settings and theoretical perspectives, nevertheless share some assumptions about WAC/writing center partnerships, one of those being “that Writing Centers have moved away from their previously marginalized status toward a more centralized institutional position with the potential to effect curricular change” (ix). That may well be, but one of the themes that rings throughout the subtext of most of the chapters in this book is a sense that writing centers may see their partnerships with WAC programs as a means of escaping marginalization, not so much a result. Throughout this collection, the contributors offer strategies for making WAC programs (with their essential focus on faculty development and curricular transformation) and writing centers (with their primary focus on students) work together as mutually-supportive, if not completely unified visions of writing instruction. Among the many benefits of doing so, imply the collected authors, is the fact that a tighter integration with other programs and institutional missions enhances the prospects for a writing center’s survival.

The chapters in this collection alternate between show and tell narratives and theoretical explorations of particular contexts. Readers are treated to a broad set of diverse strategies for implementing WAC/writing center integration by witnessing how it has

played out at a wide variety of institutions with different missions, different constituencies, different curricula, different administrative philosophies, and different theoretical assumptions about writing instruction. Writing center publications have a long history of show and tell—one notable example being the well-known and oft-cited *Writing Centers in Context*—often prefaced with the claim that the narratives should not be considered templates for every program or center. Yet, despite the desire of writing center folk to “tell their stories,” it has often seemed more fruitful to look at center work through the lens of theory/practice since it is easier to re-form abstract theory to a concrete situation than it is to stretch a template into another context—especially since our templates are formed of far more extenuating circumstances than can possibly be revealed in a single chapter. If there is a particular weakness to this book, it is that too few contributors feel the need to ground their narratives of curricular implementation in explicit discussions of writing center or WAC theory.

The show and tell strategy might be useful to those new to writing centers and WAC, though a large chart or survey of programs might prove equally useful to beginners or to those looking for new models. “The Writing Center as Ambassador Plenipotentiary in a Developing WAC Program,” “When a Writing Center Undertakes a Writing Fellows Program,” “The WAC/Writing Center Partnership: Creating a Campus-wide Writing Environment,” “Au-

thority and Initiation: Preparing Students for Discipline-specific Language Conventions,” “Writing Center or Experimental Center for Faculty Research, Discovery, and Risk Taking?” and “Finding Common Ground: When WAC Director Meets Neurotic Pride,” are narratives which largely describe how events transpired as programs were built, what roadblocks prevented progress, and how such roadblocks have been addressed. Like Fulwiler and Young’s collection, *Writing Across the Disciplines and Programs That Work*, these chapters offer models and workshop recipes that give direction to an administrator or director responsible for growing or sustaining a WAC/writing center partnership.

Even more pointedly, several chapters in the collection focus primarily on the political and pedagogical problems raised by working with faculty, most of whom have little training or expertise in writing instruction, many of whom are resistant to the principles of WAC, and at least some of whom are resentful of the colonizing role WAC faculty might seem to adopt in workshops. Johnston and Speck, in their chapter on “The Writing Center as Ambassador Plenipotentiary in a Developing WAC Program” argue that representatives from the writing center can be particularly valuable in overcoming faculty resistance to WAC because they can support the program while being essentially independent of it; as such, the writing center has the power to negotiate understanding among disciplinary faculty without being seen as a direct

threat. Haviland, Green, Shields, and Harper's chapter on "Neither Missionaries Nor Colonists Nor Handmaidens: What Writing Tutors Can Teach WAC Faculty about Inquiry" also reflects upon the dangers of antagonizing faculty with the "colonization narratives" that typically inhabit WAC workshops. Working from the perspective of postcolonial theory, these authors encourage and offer models for collaborative approaches that respect the voices of disciplinary and writing faculty alike. Harris' "A Writing Center without a WAC Program: The De Facto WAC/Writing Center" warns us that while we put our efforts into a WAC/writing center initiative, faculty "are not likely to be able to sustain interest in an institution that does not reward them for the effort in some way . . . . Worse yet, when an institution makes no overt commitment to WAC and when it encourages by rewarding research efforts," faculty will be reluctant to participate in an effort that does not count for tenure and promotion (101).

Hobson and Lerner's "Writing Centers/WAC in Pharmacy Education: A Changing Prescription" enlarges upon the typical show-and-tell format by pointing our eyes toward barriers hidden within individual universities that can unknowingly doom or promote our efforts to institute curricular change through a writing center/WAC partnership. They explain that knowing the agenda of professional schools' association (in this case the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy) can assist WAC/writing centers in promoting their programs. Both authors use the professions' "Background Paper" on curricular change to remind faculty and administration that "pharmacy educators must recast their teaching to enable students to rapidly develop higher-order critical thinking and decision-making skills, as well as mature

communication skills" (157). In sum: do your research before starting a WAC program.

Three chapters in particular are worthy of mention because of their explicit focus on theory as they consider a WAC/writing center linkage. The first is the Haviland, Green, Shields, and Harper chapter mentioned earlier, which employs postcolonial theory to argue for a particular approach to working with faculty. The second, "Situating Writing Centers and Writing Across the Curriculum Programs in the Academy: Creating Partnerships for Change with Organizational Development Theory" by Karen Vaught-Alexander, goes beyond a narrative description to ask: Once we know institutional constraints and agendas, how do we "use these to develop a WC or WAC Program with that 'right institutional fit'?" (121). Vaught-Alexander's use of organizational theory lays open a framework of practice upon which programs can be built: a useful structure for writing center practitioners in any stage of developing their centers or a WAC program.

Equally provocative is the third theoretical chapter, Christina Murphy and Joe Law's "Writing Centers and WAC Programs as Infostructures: Relocating Practice within Futurist Theories of Social Change." Using futurist theories of technology, they suggest ways to prepare ourselves and our students via a "digital economy [that] provides the technical capability to create genuinely individualized instruction" (197). This chapter makes several arguable claims that remind us of our need to unpack some of the unquestioned assumptions about writing centers and writing instruction that are deeply embedded in other chapters as well as the introduction to this collection [e.g., "the tendency in writing-intensive programs is to relegate responsibility for writing. . .

to junior faculty" (2); "WAC . . . takes responsibility for writing . . . out of the hands of many and places it in the hands of a few" (3); that "Writing Centers are extensions of classroom pedagogy or exist in opposition to the classroom" (196)]. Thankfully, the rich interactive series of programs described in this collection often, perhaps unwittingly, argue against these assumptions.

*Writing Centers and Writing Across the Curriculum Programs* is a book rich in diversity and possibilities. It reveals what we have long known—that solutions to institutional problems are negotiated locally, with reference to a particular institutional history and culture—and it reveals what we have always suspected—that writing center staff and WAC directors are an inventive and creative breed with the ability to promote good teaching and enhanced student learning in spite of obstacles, difficulties, and resistance. For those who wish to review a variety of models for WAC/writing center partnerships, this book will amply serve your needs; for those who prefer a deeper investment in theory, there are gems to be mined here but perhaps not enough to make it worth the rather steep price for the hardback edition.

## “Is this an ‘A’ paper?”: Strategies for working with literature clients in a writing lab consultation

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A large percentage of students served by a writing lab will be clients writing about literature, be it a graduate student completing a thesis on Matthew Arnold or a freshman analyzing “A Rose for Emily.” This population is a key one because the writers pose special problems for consultants, problems often reflected in the questions which clients ask during literature consultations.

Recently, five experienced writing lab consultants, majoring in chemistry, English, physics, communications, and sociology, discussed typical questions clients ask when writing about literature and the strategies which consultants can use for answering those questions. The following questions appear in the order clients might ask them as they enter the lab, excavate rough drafts from their bookbags, and turn to consultants for assistance.

### “Is there some *English* major who can help me?”

*Melissa:* I get this question a lot. It’s often accompanied by an almost comical look of dismay when I tell clients I’m a sociology major. They are dead sure I can’t help them.

*Chris:* That happens with me, too. But my response depends on when clients ask this question. If it comes at the beginning of the session, I answer, “No, I’m not an English but a chemistry major. But I know how to write a good paper, and I can show you how.” If it’s late in the session when they ask, then it’s encouraging for clients to hear I’m not an English major. Then, they think, “I can do this, too.”

In fact, some clients find it beneficial if they work with a chemistry major because I have a very logical way of

attacking writing. For instance, I have a formula for opening paragraphs. Start with a grabber that’s mildly related to the topic, especially a sentence with active verbs and good word choice, such as “Humans can be torn between love for one’s spouse and feelings of jealousy.” Then, the formula calls for one general statement in one or two sentences about the topic: “In Shakespeare’s *Othello*, the main character faces this very perplexing problem.” Next, the student writes his thesis, and, finally, he composes a sentence that hints at the conclusion. I don’t write this last sentence until I have written my paper’s own conclusion. That’s it . . . a formula for writing from a science major.

*Dennis:* And, writing is writing; it has to be clear for any reader. If it’s a biology paper, I still have to be able to understand it, even if I am a physics major.

*Laurel:* I’ve never been asked this question. Maybe clients can tell I’m an English graduate student. But, anyway, if they ask, I would stress that all of us are “guaranteed qualified” since we have to be good writers to work in the Writing Lab.

### “Have you ever read *Othello* before?”

*Chris:* This question assumes consultants should have read the literature that clients are writing about. I don’t find this necessary. It’s better to help them organize their ideas without our own interpretations. A consultant who has not read *Othello* might be better able to determine whether or not the paper proves its objective.

*Melissa:* I agree. I don’t think we consultants should always have read

the play or poem because we might have “clouded judgment.” Consultants can first get a plot summary from clients to know where the story is going. Then, we can look at the interpretation from the students’ point of view.

*Dennis:* That may be true, but it is hard to read an argument on its own without some preconceived ideas.

*Laurel:* I have mixed feelings, too. I think it’s best not to share our own interpretations, but it is helpful to have read the text, especially if clients have trouble with organization. A leading question like, “Isn’t it neat when . . .” can also get the ball rolling. In fact, it’s part of our role as consultants to share information because writing is not a solitary act.

*Dennis:* In other words, you take clients through the process if they haven’t read the text or haven’t read it well—that makes the session more collaborative.

*Melinda:* Actually, I believe it’s helpful if consultants have read the play or poem because sometimes we work with clients who know the text but just don’t understand it.

*Melissa:* I think this question can also mean that clients are seeking reassurance for their interpretations. I want to draw students through the literature, letting them relate to the characters through their own experiences. I love to see clients’ faces light up when they can make that connection between their lives and the literature.

### “Does this paper sound stupid?”

*Laurel:* This question implies that clients are afraid they have written only a shallow reading. So, I ask,

“Where do you think the paper is shallow?” In most cases, they can tell you where it needs development.

*Chris:* You can also ask clients for evidence with a question like, “Why does the author say this?”

*Dennis:* As they read their papers aloud, I ask, “Why do you like this work?” or “Why is this point valid?”

*Melissa:* I try to be diplomatic and unlock the clients’ ideas. With questions, we can guide clients through the deductive process and remind them that their professors must be able to “follow” the path to their conclusion. So, I ask “Why?” Clients usually know how to support their ideas; they just haven’t written that support yet.

*Laurel:* That’s so true.

*Dennis:* Keeping their feet grounded in the text is the key. Too often they read right *through* rather than into the text.

*Melissa:* And, haven’t you also had clients ask if they’ve interpreted the literature “right”? I go back to the students’ text, maybe pointing out, for example, how a paragraph barely analyzed a character even though the paper said the character was vital to the story. I say, “Tell me more about this character.”

*Dennis:* If clients want confirmation of a “right” interpretation, I just ask them, “Have you made your argument coherent?” “Have you proven your points with evidence?” A paper is an argument. I have no problem with “different” interpretations.

*Laurel:* Yes, even if the interpretations are a bit different from what we expect, these new views can be refreshing and enlightening.

**“On my last paper, my professor said I used too much plot summary. What’s that?”**

*Dennis:* To explain plot summary, I

say, “You’ve told me what’s in the story. Now, look back to your thesis. Do the paragraphs tell me about it?” When clients answer “No,” I suggest they go further by explaining different points and relating them to the thesis.

*Melissa:* I do it a little differently. First, I compliment clients for telling me the story. Next, I say, it’s time to make an argument. On the assignment sheet, I show them that the professor has used the word “analyze,” not “describe.”

*Laurel:* Yes, like you, I reassure clients that it’s okay that the first draft is only a plot summary, but, now, it’s time to move on to specific points.

*Dennis:* If we show them that their plot summary is a “continuum” not an “analysis,” they seem to understand better the need to interpret, not merely to list facts.

*Melinda:* I like that. We can also recommend clients should know they are really writing for professors who already know the plot!

*Laurel:* I also tell clients that a plot summary feels like a great chunk where the paper does not move forward. Thinking this way helps clients see their own plot summary.

*Melissa:* And if we keep asking, “So what?” and “Why?” most clients will start to process the stories. If not, I say, “I’m confused, please go back.”

*Chris:* Another method is to get students to view the author as an active writer who has written this story or play for a reason. Then, clients just tell why the author wrote. I bring authors into the equation rather than just stating the author’s name and leaving out his involvement in the development of ideas.

**“Do I have a tense problem?”**

*Dennis:* The question implies that clients are uncomfortable with the mechanics of writing and that they see the

surface features as more important than the writing itself. My favorite analogy is that writing is like being a carpenter; you have tools like grammar, punctuation, and even words, but you have to learn to use them through practice. In this way, clients are reassured about the technical problems.

*Melinda:* But for clients still concerned about the literary present tense, I say, “Just take each piece of literature as if it’s a current event; put yourself into the story, too, and tell it as it happens.” As a communications major, I just compare it to being a reporter on the scene covering a breaking news story.

*Dennis:* That’s a good technique. Another way is ask if the event actually happened in the literature. For example, in *Hamlet*, Hamlet’s father had already *died* before the play began, but during the play Hamlet *kills* Polonius.

*Laurel:* This tense problem is sometimes hard for them to resolve; after all, they have read the text so it’s over and done for them. They have to see the literature as still alive and vibrant.

*Chris:* Have you ever tried the “box analogy”? Tell clients to view the book as a box where the action is happening right now. Clients are just looking in whenever they open the cover.

**“Is this an ‘A’ paper?”**

*Chris:* This question shows how much clients need emotional support. In fact, I find clients are more likely to ask this question for English classes than for any other courses. Frankly, I like to avoid this question by pointing out what clients have done well, like grammar or organization.

*Dennis:* I, too, avoid this trap by telling clients it’s not my job to grade papers.

*Chris:* But, if I am asked this question at the end of a consultation, I ask if *they* feel better about the paper. That question lets them point out what they

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are still worried about and avoids our judgment.

*Laurel:* I suggest they come back to work with another consultant just to get a second reaction to the paper.

*Melinda:* Another good way to handle this question is to tell clients what we consultants got from their papers and ask them if that is what they intended to say.

*Melissa:* I just take clients through the assignment, asking, "How's your thesis?" or "Did you back it up?" I help clients decide because ultimately they must be able to judge their own writing. Besides, their professors aren't playing seven-card stud poker; they are showing all their cards on the table. I just try to make clients the winners.

As is evident from the consultants' comments, working with literature cli-

ents is an elaborate, collaborative dance, requiring steps or strategies which vary according to the clients' needs. Sometimes consultants find themselves using strategies that give intellectual support, helping clients to perform a different type of reading than when they merely extract information from a biology or history textbook. At other times, consultants dispel fears about writing, fears that probably have driven the writers to the lab. So, ironically, as clients struggle to interpret literature so, too, do consultants struggle to interpret clients. In effect, both are "decoding" because clients are working with poems or plays while consultants are trying to discern what clients truly mean by their questions.

So given all the difficulties, what can consultants ultimately stress to clients writing about literature? An analogy from X.J. Kennedy provides an answer:

All of us have some powers of reasoning and perception. And when we come to a story, or a poem, or a play, we can do little other than to trust whatever powers we have, like one who enters a shadowy room, clutching a decent candle. (1455)

Through various strategies, consultants can help clients with the candle, making sure that clients are enlightened and that clients can illuminate the work of literature in order to bedazzle even themselves.

Bonnie Devet, Director;  
Chris Hornsby, Laurel G. Marling,  
Dennis Maxwell, Melinda Rose, and  
Melissa Tidwell, Peer Consultants  
College of Charleston  
Charleston, SC

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THE WRITING LAB  
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Muriel Harris, editor  
Department of English  
Purdue University  
1356 Heavilon Hall  
West Lafayette, IN 47907-1356

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