

# THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E T T E R

Volume 26, Number 10

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

June, 2002

## ...FROM THE EDITOR...

With this issue, the 26th volume of the *Writing Lab Newsletter* comes to an close while we all take a breather for the summer. If you plan to spend some of that quiet summer leisure preparing training materials for next fall, this issue offers some useful reading for the staff. John Ikeda Franklin and his co-authors discuss working with science papers, Julie Hagemann reviews suggestions tutors can make to help students learn to read their assignments more critically, Nannette Crumrine helps fellow tutors think about how to interact with students forced to come to the writing center, Annelle Houk reviews basics of good writing, and Joseph Munch confronts the question of when and why tutorial help is ethical—and isn't. Clearly, some useful topics to read, think about, and discuss.

I wish us all a quiet, peaceful, and if it's not contradictory, productive summer—even if that means no more than straightening out last year's files, updating handout drawers, and finally getting the whole staff to wash those cups with the strange life forms replicating in there. See you next fall!

• Muriel Harris, editor

## ...INSIDE...

*The Science Experiment:  
Improving Scientific  
Writing Through Collabora-  
tion*

- John T. Ikeda Franklin,  
Kathy DeGrave, Mamie  
Crawford, and Irene  
Zegar 1

*Teaching Students to Read  
Writing Assignments  
Critically*

- Julie Hagemann 5

*Tutors' Column:  
"Force Them to and They  
Will Still Come . . ."*

- Nannette Crumrine 8

*Tutoring by Osmosis*

- Annelle Houk 10

*Conference Calendar* 13

*I Did Not Receive Aid from  
that Consultant: Operating  
a Writing Center Under an  
Honor Code*

- Joseph A. Munch 14

## The science experiment: Improving scientific writing through collaboration

### Introduction

In 1998 at Pittsburg State University (PSU) in Kansas, a unique opportunity arose for The Writing Center to change the way science writing was taught. The change came about through a collaboration of The Writing Center with the Writing-Across-the-Curriculum (WAC) program and the Chemistry Department. This article explains that collaboration.

### Recognizing the problem

It may seem that our colleagues in the sciences do not appreciate clearly written prose. However, they are aware of the necessity of writing so that information may be precisely communicated from one scientist to another, or from a grant writer to a grant reader. The problem is that many scientists have not learned how to communicate clearly. The frustrating writing style of even the most famous scientists is illustrated in the following example:

A straightforward extension of NMR spectroscopy is the measure-

ment of saturation curves and the analysis of line shapes under the influence of strong rf fields, although, in most cases, the information cannot be obtained directly but must be extracted by means of interactive approximation approaches. (*Journal of Chemical Physics* 64 [1976]: 2229)

The writer? No less an illustrious personage than Nobel Laureate Robert Ernst. A translation into more readable English would go like this:

Data obtained from the analysis of

line shapes and saturation curves in an NMR experiment is useful in obtaining structural information. However, this data cannot be obtained by direct analysis of NMR spectra and must be extracted by means of computer simulations.

Pity the poor tutor visited by the good, albeit unclear, Dr. Ernst.

Besides obscuring valuable scientific findings, poor writing also interferes with the effectiveness of grant proposals. Since reviewing panels are often composed of scientists from disciplines somewhat removed from the applicant's field of interest, it is important for a scientist to avoid problematic prose. Jargon and idiosyncratic writing can jeopardize funding opportunities.

Poor writing can occur at all levels of scientific discourse. The chemistry students at PSU are not exempt from that reality. Students are often unable to communicate their laboratory findings in a concise fashion: their reports are long and redundant. Most student reports are also unorganized, making them hard to read. Often, too, these reports are filled with grammatically inept phrasing that makes it all but impossible to decipher results. By avoiding these writing issues, the Chemistry Department was preparing scientists who would perpetuate the problems of scientific writing.

The WAC director recognized the problem while teaching faculty to use writing in their courses, specifically in courses designated as Writing to Learn (WL). Almost every discipline on campus has at least one WL course, and initially the sciences were also represented. Recently, however, science courses had begun to disappear: first physics, then biology, then chemistry. When asked why, the Chemistry faculty admitted they were so busy teaching chemistry they didn't have time to focus on writing.

### Formulating a solution

In response to this problem the WAC director suggested that The Writing

Center could help. But there was some skepticism. For some people, the thought of combining the Chemistry Department and The Writing Center was as strange as pairing pickles and ice cream: both perfectly fine in their own right, but strange, alchemical, almost mystical (if we think of the strange cravings of expectant mothers) when mixed.

Why does it seem so strange? Maybe because chemistry seems to the uninitiated like some arcane subject that uses curious symbols that look like nothing so much as honeycombs. And the written language of chemistry is just as opaque: words are eight syllables long, with Greek roots like "hydroxy" and "chloraethyl something-or-other"; worse, these words are strung together into complicated sentences. To many English majors and writing center tutors, chemistry papers seem to be written in another language.

Meanwhile, from their point of view, scientists are wary of places called writing centers or even more worrisome: writing "labs." Who knows what goes on there? To a chemist, after all, a chemical is tangible, weighable, observable, with predictable reactions. In a writing center, tutors manipulate un-touchable things like "voice" and "tense" in order to conjure up "development"—all very vague. Chemistry and The Writing Center seemed like two worlds apart—totally insoluble.

But the Chemistry Chair, ever ready to tackle the unknown, thought about it a few minutes. Then his eyes lit up: "We assign it," he said (because, of course, the teachers were already assigning lab reports; they just weren't very happy with the results) "and The Writing Center grades the writing!"

Something had gone terribly awry. Collaboration had become cooptation. The WAC director quickly suggested The Writing Center tutors simply talk with the chemistry students about their reports. To do this, tutors would need a sample of a good lab report—anno-

The *Writing Lab Newsletter*, published in ten monthly issues from September to June by the Department of English, Purdue University, is a publication of the International Writing Centers Association, an NCTE Assembly, and is a member of the NCTE Information Exchange Agreement. ISSN 1040-3779. All Rights and Title reserved unless permission is granted by Purdue University. Material will not be reproduced in any form without express written permission.

**Editor:** Muriel Harris

**Managing 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

web site: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/lab/newsletter/index.html>

**Subscriptions:** The newsletter has no billing procedures. Yearly payments of \$15 (U.S. \$20 in Canada) are requested, and checks must be received four weeks prior to the month of expiration to ensure that subscribers do not miss an issue. Please make checks payable to Purdue University and send to the Managing Editor. Prepayment is requested for all subscriptions.

**Manuscripts:** Recommended length for articles is 10-15 double-spaced typed pages, 3-5 pages for reviews, and 4 pages for the Tutors' Column, though longer and shorter manuscripts are invited. If possible, please send as attached files or as cut-and-paste in an e-mail to mjturley@purdue.edu. Otherwise, send a 3 and 1/2 in. disk with the file, along with the paper 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).

tated so that the chemistry students and the tutors both could see what was being emphasized. Then chemistry teachers would grade the report.

Yes, the chair decided, that combination might work; he was sold. So the next step was to sell the idea to The Writing Center.

Pickles and ice cream didn't seem like a particularly palatable combination to The Writing Center director, who already had more than a plateful on the agenda. Thus, his initial reaction mirrored that of his colleagues in chemistry: he just didn't see where he had much more time and energy to help conduct this experiment. But after some days of digesting the thought, the director began to see pickles and ice cream as almost natural.

So, the science experiment commenced.

### Implementing the solution

The heart of the solution is a two-part guideline: a sample of both a failed lab report and a "good" one, and a series of questions. During a session, tutors and students could follow the questions from first to last, from a report's requirements for a title to its expectations for error analysis. Hypothetically, this procedure enables students to see what is missing in a report, or understand where more substantial development is needed. To guarantee participation, each chemistry student is required to visit The Writing Center at least twice during the semester.

To initiate the solution, the Chemistry faculty, the WAC director, and the director of The Writing Center met for a roundtable discussion. During this meeting, there was dialogue about diverse purposes and forms of writing. Additionally, a mock tutoring session anticipated problems that might occur. From that discussion, sample reports and guiding questions were developed.

Procedures for both Organic Chemistry and General Chemistry were placed

in folders with the sample reports. These documents are available to tutors, who are trained through role-modeling and discussion.

Here is how one tutor conducts a session with a chemistry student:

First and foremost, the tutor practices a "hands off" philosophy by asking the chemistry student to write all comments. As she does this, the tutor prioritizes "higher order concerns" over "lower order concerns." For example, she'll ensure that necessary report sections have been written before she discusses grammatical errors.

Second, the tutor follows appropriate procedures; the guidelines are a "tutor's best friend." She starts by asking such simple questions as, "Did you include the title and date of the experiment and the names of your lab partners?" The number of writers who forget to provide that basic information causes this tutor to shake her head. As the session proceeds, the questions become more thought-provoking. When a tutor asks, "Would someone be able to duplicate this experiment using only the description in your procedure section?" students must confront the assumptions behind the experiment and the particular realities they faced. As a result, chemistry students can take charge of their own learning and become better writers.

Third, tutors adjust to individual chemistry instructors. Occasionally, students present revised formats reflecting their instructor's new instructions, involving some change from the guidelines. This requires tutors to be flexible; it also requires them to communicate well as they relay the newfound discrepancies to The Writing Center director and WAC coordinator.

### Analysis and discussion

Results are still coming in, but we can point to some statistics and commentary that give a sense of how things are progressing with our experiment.

Statistically, the number of visits to The Writing Center increased 47% with the initiation of the science experiment. And the effect of the visits on students' grades is noticeable. In one class, students improved from a pre-experiment average of 71.5% on their first reports to an average of 83% on their third report. As the Chemistry Chair says, "The reports are much better—the sentences are good and all the parts of the report are there. The chemistry is still wrong, but now I can see the errors more clearly."

Anecdotally, we can note these comments left by chemistry students: "learned more of how to organize my lab report and the required format"; "good tips and instruction for future reference were given"; "it did help to show me more of what is required in writing my lab report." These comments indicate that students are aware of their success.

Despite this success, two problems remained: (1) overcoming chemistry students' resentment at being required to visit The Writing Center; and (2) maintaining communication between the Chemistry Department and The Writing Center.

### Further experimentation

To address these problems, The Writing Center director decided that it would be worthwhile to investigate a slightly different approach to the science experiment. Rather than have students visit The Writing Center, he proposed exporting The Writing Center to the chemistry department. In the Spring of 2000 he set up shop in a conference room in the chemistry building. The lab instructor allowed groups of students to leave the lab and bring their reports to the tutors. This initial effort was successful for three reasons: (1) chemistry students no longer felt inconvenienced; (2) communication was more efficient: if there were questions about reports, the instructor was at hand with answers; and (3) tutors felt better supported by chemistry instructors, who dropped by to see how their students fared.

The second time The Writing Center presented itself in the chemistry building was even more successful because the Chemistry Chair put a “chem labbie”—a chemistry major hired to help students having difficulty in this scientific discipline—at The Writing Center’s disposal. The labbie was trained like any other tutor and joined the tutoring team for the second visit to the Chemistry Department. It was quickly apparent that the labbie was more familiar with the assignment than the other tutors as he had actually performed the experiments being reported.

The labbie’s scientific expertise could be observed in his vocabulary: he could point out that “Methane is totally different from methanol.” Additionally, he was able to work with the reports more flexibly. Rather than mechanically following the procedural guidelines from first to last, the labbie

could read over a report and quickly remark upon weaknesses. For example, he could cut directly to “Results and Discussion” after recognizing that there were no problems with preceding sections. He noted where data was lacking, where it could be inserted, and why certain equations were important.

However, the labbie needed guidance from The Writing Center director. In more than one instance, he discouraged dialogue and engaged in lecture. Instead of inviting writers to converse by asking “Do you have this information?” he would dictate “You need this information.” When the director pointed this out, the labbie took a more “hands off” approach and even began to end his tutoring sessions with “Do you have any questions?”

As a result of this further refinement, The Writing Center director’s and the

WAC director’s mantra became “train and supervise,” thereby returning the responsibility for writing to the Chemistry Department, with just a little help from their writing center friends.

In conclusion, we have come to realize that as the WAC program looks ahead to increased participation with scientific disciplines including physics, it might be that mixing sciences and The Writing Center isn’t so strange after all. Indeed, rather than being as initially nauseating as pickles and ice cream, the combination might be as delightfully delicious as pizza and beer.

*John T. Ikeda Franklin, Kathy DeGrave, Mamie Crawford, Irene Zegar  
Pittsburg State University  
Pittsburg, KS*

## **International Writing Centers Association and The National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing**

Joint IWCA-NCPTW Conference  
October 23-25, 2003  
Hershey, Pennsylvania

For more information, see the conference Web site: <[www.wc.iup.edu/2003conference](http://www.wc.iup.edu/2003conference)> or contact the conference chair, Ben Rafter, [brafoth@iup.edu](mailto:brafoth@iup.edu).

## **Southeastern Writing Center Association**

February 13 - 15, 2003  
Charlotte, NC.

Contact Information: Deanna Rogers, Writing Resources Center, 220 Fretwell, 9201 University City Blvd., UNC Charlotte, Charlotte, NC 28223-0001. Phone: (704) 687-4226; fax: (704) 687-6988; e-mail: [drrogers@email.uncc.edu](mailto:drrogers@email.uncc.edu).

# Teaching students to read writing assignments critically

Much of the writing students do in college begins first with the complex and critical task of reading and interpreting an assignment sheet. Students must be able to use the directions on the page to envision both the document called for and the steps they could take to successfully produce it. Moreover, they must learn to make sense of an author (a teacher) more or less able to imagine a writing assignment and more or less skilled at directing students to successfully respond to it. And they must often do it with little support from the instructor. They must develop such an image in their minds, in spite of any obstacles, because without it, they are powerless to begin to write.

Because so much depends on how students interpret the writing assignments they are given, writing center tutors can and ought to develop strategies for helping students learn to read them critically. Surprisingly, little is said in writing or reading classes about this skill. Moreover, if handbooks and textbooks discuss assignments at all, they tend to bury the discussion in the back of the book. Therefore, writing center tutors (and tutor trainers) have to develop strategies of their own to teach students to be more sophisticated readers of assignments, to pay particular attention to how the words guide them to envision an end product, or if the words fail to guide, how to ask the instructor productive questions to supplement the assignment sheet.

Here are some suggestions for tutors that I learned from teaching my first-year composition students to read assignments critically:

**1. Find out as much as you can about kinds of writing assignments given in upper-level classes and compare/con-**

**trast them with assignments from first-year composition classes.**

It seems intuitively obvious that the more writing center tutors know about what instructors are doing, the better they can discuss writing assignments with those they tutor. They can use the language of the instructor and share what they know of his/her expectations about the assignment.

More importantly, when tutors are familiar with writing assignments, they can better make connections to what students already know—or at least have been exposed to. Since almost all students take first-year composition courses, writing center tutors can expect students to have those experiences and can draw on them in discussing writing assignments in other classes. In what way is a student's current assignment like one he/she has already written in first-year composition? In what way is it different? When tutors help students see the similarities among assignments, they help students quickly identify past experiences they can draw on to write the current assignment; when they help students see the differences, they help students understand what students still need to learn.

Helping students connect new assignments to past experience can be enormously useful. For example, one day a student in a communications class named Maria came to me for help in writing an essay. Her assignment asked her to discuss a personal relationship in terms of the characteristics of interpersonal relationships her instructor had lectured about in class. I knew that Maria had already written a similar kind of paper because in the first-year composition classes at my university, students write essays in which they analyze their culture in

terms of a theory of cultural scripting they have read and discussed in class. When I pointed out the communication assignment was in essence the same kind of analysis she had written in first-year composition, she immediately realized she already knew what to do. "Oh, I can do this," she brightened and rushed off to begin writing.

**2. Learn to read writing assignments critically and to ask productive questions about the writing task so you can model these strategies for those you tutor.**

Again, it seems intuitively obvious that the more information tutors and students have about the assignment and the teacher's expectations, the better equipped they will be to respond successfully. But just what does a tutor need to know about a writing assignment to guide a student to do well with it? In short, the same kinds of information teachers themselves consider in designing assignments. According to Donald Murray, teachers must think through several elements in creating a writing assignment—even if all of these elements do not explicitly appear on the assignment sheet itself. Murray developed a heuristic teachers can use to think through what should go into a writing prompt (94-99). Tutors, in turn, can use it to help students think through what they should take away from the prompt. Tutors can model for students how to ask questions of the writing assignments they receive, and in the event there is a gap in the information, how to ask diplomatic questions of their instructor.

Here is Murray's heuristic adapted to a student writer's point of view:

**A heuristic for understanding writing assignments**

### A. Assignment/topic.

What am I being asked to do? What is the assignment and/or topic? Am I given a certain topic or am I allowed to choose? What parameters, if any, do I have on the choice of topic?

### B. Purpose/level of formality

What is the purpose of the assignment? Why am I asked to do it?

What am I expected to do? What do I want to learn from doing it? Is the purpose formal—i.e., as a way to demonstrate I have mastered certain material? Or is it more informal—i.e., as a basis for class discussion or as a way to brainstorm about a topic?

### C. Use of course materials/use of outside sources.

How does this assignment fit into the context of the course? Am I expected to use the course content and materials? If so, how? Should I summarize and/or respond to them? Extract information from them? Use them as models? Am I expected to use outside sources, such as library- or Internet-based materials or interviews? Am I expected to use a specific research method? What documentation style am I expected to use?

### D. Needed skills.

What skills or procedures do I need to produce my text? If I am expected to use a special method, where can I find a description of the method or guidelines to follow?

### E. Genre.

What kind of text am I expected to produce—i.e., a summary, a position paper, a literary analysis, a short story, a lab report, etc.?

### F. Models.

Are models of a successful text available? If so, where can I find them?

### G. Length.

How long should the text be?

### H. Deadlines.

What are the deadlines for writing (various drafts of) this text?

### I. Available feedback.

Will time be set aside for peer review? Am I encouraged or required to turn in a draft for teacher comments?

### J. Grading criteria.

What are the grading criteria for this assignment?

If students can answer all the questions in Murray's heuristic, they have a thorough understanding of the assignment and the process of writing it.

The first-year composition program at my university has a writing-across-the-curriculum focus, so we teach students how to critically read the writing prompts they are given in their courses. We ask students to use this heuristic to annotate each prompt, identifying where each of these elements is explained or described. They make a list of questions about elements that do not seem to be addressed in the assignment so they can ask their teacher about them later. Such questions have to be asked diplomatically, of course—I recommend students brainstorm some alternative approaches and then ask the instructor which of them is preferred or which would work best. When students go to the teacher with alternatives, they communicate the message they have considered the assignment thoughtfully and have set some goals for themselves, about which they are seeking confirmation.

### 3. Encourage those you tutor to pay attention to genre.

The most important elements in Murray's heuristic are topic, purpose, genre, needed skills and grading criteria. These form the essence of a writing assignment. And of these five, genre may perhaps best enable students to visualize an end product. *Genre* is a Latin-based word meaning *kind* or *type* or *genus*. In biology, living creatures are assigned the same genus because they share similar, essential features; the same is true in writing. For example, short stories are grouped together as a genre because they share in common the essential features of plot and character development. Lab reports are another kind of genre because they share the essential feature of describing the methods and results of scientific experiment. In Murray's heuris-

tic, genre asks the question “*what kind of paper am I writing? Is it a summary, a literary analysis, a lab report, a position paper, a review of the literature, etc.?*” All of these are different *kinds* of papers.

The genre of a piece of writing identifies essential features of the text and implies important information about its format, style and approach. It is in essence a kind of shorthand for defining its purpose and audience and for determining its organization and development. Paying attention to genre helps writers determine the format of a paper and the details that are a necessary part of it. For example, a lab report generally contains the following sections: abstract, introduction (including the hypothesis to be tested), materials and methods, results, and discussion. Therefore, the writer must be sure to generate the details that are required in each section. A position paper, on the other hand, entails different kinds of details. In a position paper, the writer should clearly state his/her position, explain why he/she takes this position, and anticipate possible criticisms against his/her position and present counterarguments. The writer could also explain alternative positions and why he/she finds them inadequate, but this is may be part of the anticipated criticisms section.

In order to find out what the essential features of various genre are, it is often helpful to consult a handbook. They often explain the essential features of arguments or position papers in the section on writing arguments. Genres that are specific to certain disciplines, such as lab reports, are usually explained in the writing-across-the-curriculum section. Or tutors themselves could brainstorm a list of genres they typically encounter and some essential features and create their own handouts for students.

Genre typically refers to various formats of writing, but as Charles Cooper notes, it can also refer to the kind of

thinking necessary to generate a document (25). In other words, it is also possible to categorize writing assignments on the basis of the major intellectual move students are expected to make: to summarize, compare/contrast, evaluate, illustrate, trace, refute, etc. In this scheme, genre is organized around the key verb found in an assignment. For example, *to compare/contrast* means that students are expected to find similarities and differences in two or more items under scrutiny. *To evaluate*, on the other hand, means to assign a value judgment (positive, negative, or neutral) to the item(s) under scrutiny; *to refute* means to find the inadequacies in the argument(s); or *to trace* means to show the history and development of an item. These are very different approaches to the topic, and they entail different organizations. *To trace* entails chronological order, while *to evaluate* entails logical order, while *to compare/contrast* entails a list.

An understanding of the genre (the thinking and the format) can really make a difference in a student's response to a writing assignment. In my conference with Maria, for example, her sense of the communication assignment changed dramatically when she substituted the more specific verb *analyze* for the more general one *discuss*. While an analysis may take several written forms, it always entails the same intellectual move: to investigate a particular example to see how, where and to what extent it matches up to a general principle. Once she understood she was expected to analyze, Maria understood she had to explain a specific personal friendship (in her case, her relationship with a boyfriend she broke up with) in terms of a general list of characteristics of interpersonal relationships (in her case, intergender relationships) supplied by the teacher.

An attention to genre is in essence closely reading the writing assignment in order to articulate what it calls for. Activities that promote this careful

reading during a tutoring session help students develop strategies for reading assignments critically. Dr. William Macauley, Jr., the director of the writing center at my university, suggests that tutors read the prompt aloud and ask students to underline any words they think will help them understand the assignment and write the paper. Listening for the generative words they need to visualize the assignment helps students become conscious of the knowledge they bring to the assignment. This, in turn, he says, enables them to take ownership of it.

Moreover, handbooks often include a section on key verbs in their chapters on writing essay exams. They say that students can write good answers to test questions when they have a clear sense of what is being asked of them. This advice is useful not only in testing situations but all writing situations. In our first-year classes we point out this section in the handbook and encourage students to use it when they are analyzing writing assignments.

#### **4. Encourage those you tutor to take advantage of any kind of writing support their instructor offers.**

Above all, tutors should encourage students to use not only the writing center, but also their instructors as resources. If, for example, instructors schedule time for peer reviews or are willing to comment on drafts of papers, students should be urged to have a draft ready for review.

Like many writing centers and first-year college composition programs, the program I teach in prepares students for academic writing by helping them develop critical reading strategies. For this reason, our composition classes typically include a number of different kinds of texts. But I believe that students need special help in reading the text of the writing assignment. How they read and interpret an assignment sheet will determine in large measure how prepared they are to respond to it. As teachers and tutors of writing, we are particularly skilled at describing

writing, and we need to pass this skill on to students. If we can help students read assignment sheets critically, if we can help them envision and articulate what kind of documents are called for, we have set them on the path to successful writing.

*Julie Hagemann*  
Purdue University Calumet  
Hammond, IN

#### Works Cited

- Cooper, Charles R. "What We Know about Genres, and How It Can Help Us Assign and Evaluate Writing." *Evaluating Writing: The Role of Teachers' Knowledge about Text, Learning, and Culture*. Ed. Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell. Urbana: NCTE, 1999. 23-52.
- Macauley, William J. Personal Communication. 14 July 1999.
- Murray, Donald. *A Writer Teaches Writing*. 2nd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985. 83ff.

## Writing Center Director Wichita State U.

**Requirements:** Master's Degree with concentration in English literature, composition/rhetoric, or creative writing; minimum two years successful experience teaching and mentoring students from diverse backgrounds; a short (2-page max.) description of what you see as the role of the writing center in a university.

Send application package, including C.V. and names, addresses, and telephone numbers of three references to Margaret Dawe, Chair, Dept. of English, Wichita State University, Wichita KS 67260-0014. Applications due June 15; appt. effective Aug. 15, 2002. For expanded ad, see <[http://webs.wichita.edu/depttools/user\\_home/?view=english&page=positions](http://webs.wichita.edu/depttools/user_home/?view=english&page=positions)>

# TUTORS' COLUMN

“Force them to and they will still come . . .”

I saw her coming hurriedly around the corner, that familiar look of annoyance, anxiety, and stress combined to represent . . . of course! A student sent to the writing center by a professor. They are required to come as part of the final grade for the paper, whether they want to or not.

“Check this . . . I’m only here because my teacher made me. I need to be out of here in ten minutes,” she said as she slapped the paper down on the table and looked me straight in the eye.

It was my first semester on the job and quite early in the semester at that. I was not quite prepared to face a situation such as this because until that point, I thought of the writing center as a place students came because they genuinely needed help and wanted it. Wrong! There are many different reasons students come to a writing center, and while wanting help is there at the top, there are of course reasons such as a cute tutor, anxiety reduction, and the ever dreaded—the prof made me do it!

My first instinct was to turn my nose in the air and tell her to leave. But I held my tongue remembering that having patience in any situation is a virtue, and a work ethic important to uphold at all costs. Instead, I smiled at her and told her to have a seat. I went over the basic questions, what is your assignment? what stance did you take? is there anything specific you want me to look for? Then I asked her to read it out loud. She looked at me as if I was insane, but I just smiled encouragingly at her and added that it would help things move along a lot faster. She humored me and read the paper.

I had to admit that the paper was pretty good, which can be rare in cases like this, but as tutors we all know that something can be fixed in every paper. I asked a few questions about the paper and then we discussed her conclusion, which could definitely have used some improvement. She didn’t write anything down or really listen to anything I said, and when I was done giving her a handout on conclusions, she asked if she could go. I would have liked to talk with her further on the paper, but realized at that point it was best to let it go.

Thank goodness for student/tutor evaluations! I made it clear on the student form that she did not want to be there, so that if indeed the paper did not turn out well, no one could come back and blame me. I was disappointed when she left and felt like a failure in many ways. But with the time in the hour that she left me, I was given the opportunity to contemplate whether or not I handled that situation well.

There will be times when students come to the writing center for this very reason, at the suggestion of the professor or required to because the professor only has good intentions of seeing their students write at peak performance. Students don’t want to be there, and it is obvious from the very beginning. They think their paper is fine, and many times it is ok, but there are also times when it needs a great deal of improvement, and the tutor is the one blessed enough to be able to point it out to them.

The most important thing to keep in mind when dealing with situations like this is to never, under any circum-

stances, lose face. Never let students know they are annoying you or wasting your time for not wanting to be there. Keep a positive attitude and always smile, albeit even if it is through clenched teeth. Chances are that if you are nice to them, someday when they really have a question with their paper, they will come back to you.

Second, listen patiently while they read, even if you know that any suggestion you offer, they may not listen to. In situations like this, it is also a good idea to look for grammatical or punctuation errors. Every paper has them, and by helping the student learn how to correct this, can help establish rapport. In most cases they will not take offense at this type of suggestion because you are not implying that their ideas or writing is poor. Instead you are helping them with something we all have problems with at one time or another.

Compliment the strengths of the paper first, before working on the weaknesses. In doing this, they will recognize that you are not the enemy, that you did listen to their paper, and recognize that it is strong. Plus, as in any session, after pointing out the strengths first, when it comes to suggesting things that need to be worked on, their pride will not be damaged.

Of course, there will just be some sessions when the student does not want to be there, and they are not willing to work at all or even hear what you have to say, as was the case in my instance. As a tutor, you can only do so much. Don’t force them to stay if they don’t want to be there and you find



that nothing you say or do is going to work. Don't force them to try to learn when they don't want to, because they won't, and this can create even more tension than was already present. They will end up resenting you, and as a tutor, you will resent them for having wasted your time. Sometimes it is best to just let them go on their way when it is obvious that they cannot be reached. After all, you can't convert all of them.

The most important part is to keep the anger below the surface and not let them see they are irritating you. You don't slam the paper back at them and tell them to take a hike. Remain professional under all circumstances and at best, try to keep a smile. I have

found that staying happy and not getting mad, can improve my own outlook after the session. Doing it any other way may ruin a day or ruin the session for the next student who comes to the writing center and really needs help.

I wish I could say I have never had to deal with unhappy students who did not want to be in the writing center since, but that is not true. They pop up occasionally, but luckily for me, not with quite the same bad attitude. It is important, however, to understand where they are coming from. They may see the tutoring center as a threat and only for people who don't know how to write. We as tutors know this is not the case, that it is for all people, of

all ages, and all majors, but they don't necessarily know that. Understanding as a tutor that not all students look upon the writing center as a tool available for their convenience can help in sympathizing with the situation.

It is also important to remember that professors who force their students to use the center are not wrong in doing this. For every student who did not want to be there and did not seem to learn anything, there are two who did, and would not have otherwise come for help if they had not been required.

*Nannette Crumrine  
The University of Findlay  
Findlay, OH*

## Western Oregon University Monmouth, Oregon

WOU seeks a Writing Center Director, nine-month position starting September 2002. Position involves overseeing student tutors in the writing center and teaching responsibilities divided between English and Teacher Education. At least a Master's Degree, with focus in composition or literacy required. Preferred candidates will have demonstrated coursework/experience/training in several of the following areas: teaching writing at the lower- and upper-division college level, teaching methods for writing, reading, literature for the secondary level, supervision and training of writing center tutors, professional development/in-service workshops for faculty, writing across the curriculum/writing in the disciplines.

Salary competitive. Send letter of application, current vita and transcripts, plus three current letters of recommendation to Dr. Carol Harding, Western Oregon University, 345 N. Monmouth Ave., Monmouth, OR 97361. Initial deadline May 15, 2002; open until filled. WOU is an AA/EOE employer and is committed to fostering diversity in its student body, faculty, and staff. <<http://www.wou.edu/hr>>.

## Writing Center Technical Specialist Northern Illinois University

Technical specialist maintains server and develops online writing lab (OWL)/Writing Center websites; provides tech support; advises Director on software/hardware; assists in workshops on electronic writing technologies; tutors students; teaches one course per academic year; participates in writing center assessment.

Minimum qualifications: M.A. in Rhetoric/Composition or relevant field (e.g., English, concentration Composition Studies; communication studies), 2-4 years experience with technology maintenance and software for electronic writing environments, 2 years teaching college-level writing. Experience in a writing center or similar learning environment preferred. Salary mid-30s; regular continuing employment. Full description: <<http://www.engl.niu.edu/wac/techspec.html>>. Complete applications must be received by July 1, 2002. Send: Letter of application, CV, 3 current professional references, SASE to Brad Peters, English Department, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL 60115. AA/EEO institution.

# Tutoring by osmosis

---

Ideally, tutors in writing centers become writing consultants: knowledgeable people who lend their superior analytical and writing skills to clients who need either to frame new compositions or to revise existing ones. For either of those purposes, consultants need a functional knowledge of English grammar: how sentences are constructed in the English language. If consultants themselves use grammar consciously and at a high level for thinking, listening, speaking, reading, and writing, they have the capacity to learn to tutor students—by osmosis—unity, adequate development, and coherence.

Remember that osmosis is the tendency of something (usually a fluid) to pass through a semipermeable membrane from a higher concentration to a lower concentration until the concentrations are equalized. Tutoring by osmosis posits a significantly higher concentration of conscious knowledge of grammar in consultants than in their clients. Although there may sometimes seem to be no semipermeable membrane, writing consultants need to get considerable grammar through to their clients to help them accomplish three things: (1) to become conscious of the grammar that they already own if English is their native language; (2) to increase their ability to understand and use grammar for thinking; and, therefore, (3) to think and write more and more effectively the rest of their lives.

Precisely how do writing consultants—by osmosis—use grammar to help students learn how to improve their writing by themselves? The answer is about both manner and method, with the success of the method dependent in large part on the manner.

Most students come to writing centers already so anxious not to reveal

their ignorance that they will try to say whatever they guess the consultants want to hear. At that first moment of vulnerability, osmosis begins. Consultants acknowledge and affirm what students already know, then identify and contribute what they need to learn. When students absorb grammar and thinking that way, they are likely to attach those increments of new information to their existing knowledge. That kind of non-judgemental incremental repetition can help students make their learning permanent.

As for osmosis as a method, essentially, consultants ask questions about the architecture of writing—unity (by whatever name), adequate development, and coherence.

## Unity

*Unity* is a result of harmony among the elements of the composition. Consultants need to help their students absorb the concept of unity and develop it into a practical thinking tool. To that end, consultants *very often* begin their first tutoring sessions by asking questions designed to help the students to construct topic sentences. Their creation of fully developed topic sentences readies them to learn how to use the grammar of those thesis statements to control and unify the development or the revision of their papers. A brief explanation of how to limit a topic sentence appears at the end of this section on unity.

### 1. *What are you writing about?*

This question is about content—subject matter. The answer to this question will be a complete sentence, however poorly conceived, and will be the basis for a topic sentence. A student might say, for example, “Something ought to be done about parking.”

**2. *To whom are you writing?*** Students need to picture some actual person or group of people—maybe their professors—reading what they write. For example, who might be able to “do something about parking”? Once their audiences are real to them, students can take into account what information about and interest in their topics their audiences already have and therefore accurately limit the amount of detail they must supply.

**3. *What is your attitude toward your audience?*** In passing, consultants need to make students aware that how they feel about their audiences will affect the tone of their writing. However, consultants should not expect students to learn to edit for tone until they have learned to draft unified, adequately developed, and coherent compositions.

**4. *Why are you writing?*** A consultant should never accept as a reason for writing, “My prof said I had to write this thing.” Consultants must insist that students identify whether they are writing to explain, to persuade, to amuse, to describe, to tell a story, etc. The purpose usually will appear in a thesis statement as an adverbial clause modifying the verb or an infinitive clause used as a direct object. Every well-written composition ought to be framed to fit the purpose for writing it.

## Limiting a thesis.

Carefully crafted thesis sentences prepare students to control both the content and the organization of their papers. Therefore, consultants need to help students revise their generalizations until they accurately reflect grammatically the logical complexity of whatever subject matter students intend to write about.

For consultants, one of the most difficult things about tutoring by osmosis is to learn how to get through to students—probably without using the terminology—how to apply a few specific grammatical rules of thumb. There are four of those primary rules:

**1. Allow no passive voice verbs in thesis statements.** Students—even engineering students—absolutely must know what the subject is in the main clause of thesis statements. “Something ought to be done about parking” requires restatement in the active voice to name the entity who can “do something.” Showing a student how to make the change from passive to active voice is always appropriate. However, tutoring by osmosis allows consultants to use the terms *active voice* and *passive voice* only if the formal rather than the practical explanation is appropriate.

**2. Replace any indefinite pronouns with the antecedent to which the students intend the pronouns to refer.** Often, students will replace an indefinite pronoun with an indirect question or a noun clause or even an infinitive clause. The “something that ought to be done about parking,” for example, could become “to add more parking,” “to provide a second entrance to the parking deck,” or whatever more specific remedy a student might seek.

**3. Make all substantives (nouns, pronouns, infinitives, gerunds, noun clauses, indirect questions, indirect quotations) as precise as possible.** Tutoring by osmosis rules out using most of that terminology with students. However, consultants themselves have to understand very thoroughly how to revise sentences to allow students to replace substantives or to add adjectives—whether words, phrases, or clauses—to modify them. The more complex the ideas students are writing about,

the more complex their thesis sentences will become.

**4. Get rid of any part of any compound construction that causes a topic not to be unified.**

This step requires high level osmosis. Consultants will point out coordinating conjunctions to students and walk them through determining whether compounds or series clarify or divide topics. Without exception, a compound sentence violates the basic principle of a single unified topic because a unified topic can have only one independent clause. However, there may be compound subjects so long as they control all the verbs of the predicate and/or compound predicates that all have the same subjects. If there are compound adjectives or adverbs—whether they are subordinate clauses, phrases, or single words—students need to decide whether or not all their elements are necessary.

**Adequate development**

*Adequate development* results when students provide enough but not too much information for the purpose of the paper and suit the information to the audience. Osmosing adequate development to students requires enormously patient and inventive questioning unique to both the student and the student’s composition.

**1. What points does your topic sentence require you to write about?** This question is aimed at students’ seeing that each major element of their various papers has a clear logical relation to their topics, their audiences, and their purposes. The topic itself requires an introduction. The subject of the topic sentence and any direct object or complement in it require definitions. The purpose of the paper relates to an explanation of how the subject affects any object. A subject with a complement lends

itself to parallels, comparisons, and contrasts. Every subordinate clause in the thesis statement—whether substantive (noun or noun equivalent), adjective, or adverb clause—may well require a separate paragraph.

**2. Will the paper begin with the purpose and the summary of the topic? Or will the paper build one idea at a time to a conclusion at the end of the paper?** Consultants should encourage novice writers always to begin their compositions with explanations of their thesis statements, to support their theses with paragraphs of detail, and to end with a summary. Only very occasionally will students who come for help in the writing center be sophisticated enough to build their papers paragraph by paragraph to a conclusion not stated until the end.

**3. What is the purpose of each paragraph?** Students need to write for each paragraph a topic sentence to control the paragraph’s development. Those topics need to be as carefully limited as the thesis statements that control their entire papers. Unlike thesis statements that control but seldom appear in papers, students usually *will* use the topic sentences of paragraphs both as content and to control the development of their paragraphs.

**4. For each paragraph, what support does your topic sentence require for your particular audience?**

Adequacy of development mostly concerns subject matter rather than grammar.

**Coherence**

*Coherence* is a matter of logical interconnections. For a composition as a whole, coherence derives from singleness of subject—unity—and the orderly development of constituent ideas.

Coherence within paragraphs and sentences depends on many small details both of substance and of structure. Osmosis coherence to students taps every logical and grammatical resource of even the most able consultant.

Repetition of subject matter ought to be the most deliberate logical connection that writing consultants help students learn to maintain throughout their papers. Five questions will help consultants focus students' efforts to make their papers coherent.

- 1. Do you develop some part of the content of your thesis sentence in every paragraph?** Logically, the first paragraph should require the development of the second paragraph. The second paragraph should continue the development of the first and lead to the third and so on throughout the paper.
- 2. Does the order of your paragraphs reflect the logic of your thesis statement?**
- 3. Is the content subject of a paragraph the grammatical subject of most of your sentences?** Keeping that kind of grammatical focus helps students keep their papers unified. For example, if a student is writing about the administration's "doing something about the parking lot," the grammatical subject of most sentences will be the administration rather than the parking lot.
- 4. Is the content of the first sentence of your paragraph reflected in the second sentence; of the second, in the third; of the third, in the fourth; and so on?**
- 5. If you begin an argument in one sentence, do you continue that argument logically in the next sentence and thereafter?**

Editing for coherence at the sentence and paragraph level is very different

from writing. It brings into play all of the rules of standard English for forming sentences and phrases from words and all of the fine points of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and usage. Not all English professors can get to coherence at that level. Fewer tutors can. Many students are only meandering vaguely in that direction. Therefore, writing consultants need to osmose coherence to students at a rudimentary level represented by four grammatical rules of thumb:

- 1. Insist that every sentence make complete sense.** Accept a sentence fragment only if the student can defend it as a complete thought in context.
- 2. Require that every pronoun have an unambiguous antecedent.** By osmosis rather than jargon, consultants need to help students learn to verify that every pronoun refers in number, person, and gender to a substantive (noun, infinitive, gerund, noun clause, indirect question, indirect quotation) that precedes it. No other single editing step can improve students' writing more than their learning to recognize that a pronoun cannot leap over one noun that it matches in number, person, and gender to refer to another more distant from it. The cure of faulty reference of pronouns is, of course, to repeat the noun or noun equivalent that is the intended antecedent rather than to use the ambiguous pronoun.
- 3. Assure that the content subject of the paragraph appears in some form in every sentence.** The variety of ways subject matter may be repeated for coherence is infinite. Exact repetition always is clear: the same noun, the same verb, the same phrase or clause. A pronoun can bring its antecedent forward into a later sentence. Some part of the subject—"the body," for example—may appear in the next sentence as a

part—a body part, for example: a hand or foot, bone or blood, the brain or the mind. Subject matter also may be repeated in different grammatical forms. For example, if the topic sentence begins "Blood flows . . ." the content may be carried forward as a noun with a prepositional phrase ("the flow of blood"), by a synonym ("circulation"), by a different verb used as a participle ("pumped by the heart"), and so on.

- 4. Have students revise sentences with passive voice verbs to make the voice active.** Students who come to writing labs have enough trouble dealing with sentence parts that are clearly visible. Let them wait for intentional use of the passive voice.

Over time, with good writing instruction, most students will learn to write more and more coherently even in first drafts.

Can tutoring by osmosis actually produce an equal concentration of grammar and logic in consultants and tutors? Never. Whoever learns to use grammar most rigorously for thinking learns most; so no matter how much the knowledge of students increases, consultants benefit more. However, a well-osmosed student will be much stronger and more independent for the experience.

*Annelle Houk*  
Professional Writer and Editor  
Charlotte, North Carolina

---

## Assistant Director of Writing Center Morgan State University

Staff position with benefits. Supervising tutors and the Writing Center into evening hours. Occasional teaching responsibilities in Composition. Minimum qualification Master's degree in English or Instructional Design with a high degree of professional interest in Composition Studies, to include assistance with tutor training, faculty training, and facilitation. Expertise in recent developments in composition and technology is a plus. Candidate must communicate well in interview.

Applicants must demonstrate a commitment to working with an ethnically and culturally diverse student population. Salary dependent on experience. Review of credentials will begin immediately, and continue until position is filled. Applicants should send a letter, curriculum vitae, official transcripts, three current letters of recommendation, a writing sample, and teaching philosophy to:

Dolan Hubbard, Professor and Chairperson  
Department of English  
Morgan State University  
1700 E. Cold Spring Lane  
Baltimore, MD 21251

Morgan State University is an AA/EOE. <<http://www.morgan.edu>>.

## Books available from IWCA Press (formerly NWCA Press)

- ✓ *Writing Center Resource Manual*, Second Edition. Edited by Bobbie Silk (\$25 + \$4 shipping and handling)
- ✓ *Writing Center Resource Manual*, Supplement to the First Edition. 3 new chapters; 2 revised chapters (\$10 + \$2 shipping and handling).
- ✓ Logo Contest. Design a logo for IWCA. The winner receives three years of IWCA Press Books and \$100. Deadline July 1, 2002.
- ✓ Forthcoming: *The OWL Construction and Maintenance Guide*. A CD ROM. Edited by James Inman and Clint Gardner. Available in May 2002.

Direct all inquiries to:  
Byron Stay, General Editor  
IWCA Press  
16300 Old Emmitsburg Road  
Emmitsburg, MD 21727

## Calendar for Writing Centers Associations

October 25-27, 2002: Midwest Writing Centers Association, in Lawrence, KS  
**Contact:** Michele Eodice (michele@ku.edu) or Cinda Coggins (CCoggins66@aol.com). Conference Web site: <<http://www.writing.ku.edu/ncptw-mwca>>.

February 13-15, 2003: Southeastern Writing Center Association, in Charleston, SC  
**Contact:** Deanna Rogers, Writing Resources Center, 220 Fretwell, 9201 University City Blvd., UNC Charlotte, Charlotte, NC 28223-0001. Phone: (704) 687-4226; fax: (704) 687-6988; e-mail: drrogers@email.uncc.edu.

October 23-25, 2003: International Writing Centers Conference and National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing, in Hershey, PA  
**Contact:** Ben Rafoth, brafoth@iup.edu. Conference Web site: <[www.wc.iup.edu/2003conference](http://www.wc.iup.edu/2003conference)>.

## I did not receive aid from that consultant: Operating a writing center under an honor code

---

Writing centers are dens of academic sin. Or so some people claim. Before I continue, let me explain a few things. I'm not discussing the possibility that consultants tell students how to write their papers. I am *absolutely not* discussing the possibility that consultants write students' papers for them. The notion of a writing center consultant writing another student's paper is absurd; so is the idea that a consultant would actually tell a client how to write his paper. Writing centers, with *very* few exceptions, simply don't do such things. Instead, I am discussing how writing centers have the unpleasant potential to compromise some of the more important facets of university honor systems. For this discussion, I will use my own university's honor system and writing center as examples to explain the implications of operating a writing center under an honor code.

"I have neither given nor received aid on this examination, nor have I seen anyone else do so." So reads Southwestern University's Honor Pledge. Placards bearing its familiar words can be found within every classroom on the institution's campus, including the university's new Debby Ellis Writing Center (DEWC). Before the DEWC can rightfully establish itself as a viable component of Southwestern's academic scene, it must realize the ethical implications stemming from its existence within an environment governed by one of the nation's oldest and most traditional Honor Codes.

The purpose of Southwestern's Honor System, according to the university's Constitution, is to ensure that students' "integrity is respected and their work is accepted as completely valid." Furthermore, the Honor System is designed "to stimulate and promote the ideals of honesty and integrity among students, and to eliminate the practice of cheating by putting into practice these ideals of honesty

and integrity" ("Southwestern University Student Handbook" 32).

By promoting ideals of honesty and integrity, Southwestern's Honor Code champions individual scholarship. Both the university's Constitution and its Honor Code state that students are to do their own work. Because giving or receiving aid on any assignment violates this Code, every consultation at the writing center contains a possible threat to what is arguably the foundation of the Honor Code. The ethical or unethical actions of both consultant and client determine whether or not this happens.

Writing center virtuoso Stephen North declares that "Our job is to produce better writers, not better writing" (North 438). According to North, the aim of any writing center is to hone the methodology a client uses to achieve a quality paper by addressing the paper itself. The philosophy of Southwestern's writing center echoes North's statement: "The mission of the [DEWC] simply stated, is to improve Southwestern students' writing . . . with attention to both process and product" (Piedmont-Marton 2). However, writing center consultants "do not proofread writing. Instead, they assist students in learning to be more self-aware and effective editors of their own work" (Piedmont-Marton, sec. 4).

By assisting students to become more self-aware and effective editors of their own work, however, consultants foster one of several potential threats to the individual scholarship sustaining the Honor Code. When does a consultation become more than a collaborative effort to improve a client's writing? Jennifer Herek and Mark Niquette claim that "On one side of the line, the tutor's actions are justifiably ethical because they allow the tutee to learn and develop original in-

sights. . . . On the other side of this ethical boundary, the tutor's actions can no longer be considered ethical because he or she impedes the tutee's academic progress; whether by doing the work for the tutee or by taking away his or her chance to discover insights independently" (12). Muriel Harris offers a similar insight: "To what degree can or should writers and tutor collaborate? . . . Tutors need to define for themselves the degree of intervention that is appropriate in a student's work" (sec. 3).

Harris, Niquette, and Herek outline ideals embraced by most, if not all, writing centers. For example, at Southwestern's writing center, Harris's "degree of intervention" should, and as a rule, does, terminate at the "ethical boundary" Herek and Niquette describe. Crossing such a threshold by, say, providing their clients with quick, easy answers to problems they should be solving themselves would obviously constitute a violation of Southwestern's Honor Code. However, Harris urges a more thorough analysis of the writing center-honor code relationship when she asserts, "where specific honor codes exist that stipulate that no student may help another, the function of collaborative learning must be considered to see if and how it impinges upon this stipulation" (Harris, sec. 3). To take Harris's advice: When consultants and their clients confer in the DEWC, do they defy Southwestern's Honor Code, which *specifically* insists that no student may help another?

Yes. And no.

In the context of the Honor Pledge alone, a violation of the Honor Code—cheating, to be precise—has definitely taken place. Technically, writing center consultants *give aid* to their clients, who *receive* it. Although consultants would like clients to compromise the Honor Code in this instance—perhaps by asking their clients to attach a trite "except for

going to the writing center” to the end of the Honor Pledge—in good conscience, they cannot. Given is *given*, received is *received*, and aid is *aid*. That *cannot* be contested, unless one realizes that the scope of the Honor Code extends *far* beyond the act of signing the Honor Pledge.

While Southwestern’s Constitution dictates that a violation of the Honor Code includes “the intentional giving or receiving of aid,” it also articulates that this “giving or receiving of aid” pertains to “any work which is specified by the professor to be done individually.” Put simply, professors determine exactly what constitutes an Honor Code violation. Therefore, although both the university’s constitution and its Honor Pledge indicate that *any* giving or receiving of aid is a violation of the Honor Code, in actuality, only the *unsanctioned* giving or receiving of aid is an Honor Code violation. With professors’ approvals, lab partnerships, group work, and tutorials—all prime examples of *collective*, and not *individual*, scholarship—flourish throughout Southwestern with little fear of violating the Honor Code. Similarly, when a visit to the writing center is approved, or even encouraged, by a professor, only a minimal possibility of Honor Code infringement exists.

Although professors possess the final authority in deciding what an Honor Code violation includes, professors are not, and cannot be, the sole enforcers of the Honor Code. This being the case, it should come as somewhat of a surprise that some people argue that writing center consultants usurp professors’ authority in matters of Honor Code violations. Not so. True, writing center consultants occupy a rather unique space in the scheme of the Honor System; they have become a kind of innocent third-party infiltrator of the traditional student-professor relationship. However, at Southwestern, writing center consultants are still *students*. According to Southwestern’s Constitution, students, like professors, have an obligation to uphold the principles of the Honor Code at all times. Their moments spent in the writing center, whether as consultants or clients, are no exception.

For example, assume for a moment that a student approaches the writing center to discuss an English Composition essay. After reading the paper, the consultant has ample reason to believe that his client has copied another person’s essay and has claimed it as his own. What should the consultant do in this instance? Hopefully, any consultant working in an honor code environment would immediately report the client’s questionable actions to the Student Judiciary, the student’s English Composition professor, or some related authority. But wait. Some may contend that plagiarism has not occurred in this instance. After all, the alleged plagiarist in this example has not yet submitted his paper to the English Composition professor for a grade. Besides, the line separating ignorant misappropriation and blatant plagiarism is often blurred with circumstance. What does “plagiarism” entail? Can plagiarism occur if no grade is involved? Can one person’s concept of plagiarism become another person’s idea of a job well done? And for the purposes of this argument, who is the *consultant* to determine what constitutes plagiarism, or, for that matter, what constitutes a violation of the Honor Code? As mentioned, professors are the final authority on Honor Code violations; similarly, they are often the final determiners of academic fraud. But students, maintains the university’s constitution, are obliged to report any violation of the Honor Code seen *or suspected*. When he relays his knowledge of a suspected incident of plagiarism to a higher authority, the writing center consultant in this example, being a student himself, is merely fulfilling his role as an active member of honor-coded academe.

Despite the “every student upon his or her honor” basis of honor codes, some writing centers install “ethical failsafes” designed to eliminate honor code infractions within their realm. The policies enacted in one particular writing center typify these “ethical failsafes.” The consulting process in the Lawrence University Writing Lab

(LUWL)

“begins with a faculty contact and faculty consent for the student to work in the Lab. A faculty member must sign a form granting permission to the student to work in the Lab for a specified period of time. . . . the tutor schedules a conference among the student, the professor involved, and him or herself to discuss what aspects of the student’s writing warrant the most attention and what the focus of the tutorials sessions will be.” (Herek and Niquette 13)

Wait a minute—“Consent?” “Permission?” And what’s all this crazy talk about signing forms and getting the professor involved? Although the LUWL’s approach to ensuring honor code adherence is noteworthy, it is not trustworthy. By requiring a professor’s *written* consent prior to a consultation, the LUWL is implying that their clients would otherwise violate the honor code by coming to the writing center with or without a professor’s approval. Additionally, by having the professor sit in on a consultation, the LUWL is implying that if the professor *didn’t* attend the consultation, an honor code violation would occur. When writing centers establish these types of policies, they undermine the very honor codes they are trying to uphold. An honor code whose participants come under professors’ scrutiny once they enter the writing center isn’t much of an honor code at all.

All that being said, why should writing centers be concerned about their positions within honor code environments? Assuming that every consultation follows standard writing center philosophies, and assuming that students—including consultants and clients—willingly uphold honor code principles of honesty and integrity, no questions regarding the compatibility of honor codes and writing centers should arise. We really shouldn’t have anything to worry about. Famous last words. Thomas C. Thompson writes,

In short, the Honor Code makes little

difference in tutoring practices at the Writing Center. . . . What matters most is not a concern for the Honor Code, but a concern for creating better student writers. . . . And that approach should work on any campus. (14)

True, in Southwestern's writing center, a concern for creating better writers supersedes any real concern for the Honor Code. And yes, that approach *should* work on any campus, in any writing center. Nevertheless, Southwestern's Honor Code affects the way consultants—as well as their clients—conduct themselves in the writing center. As Southwestern students, consultants and clients alike are expected to embrace the philosophies of honesty and integrity embodied by the university's Honor Code; consequently, ethical consistency is all but guaranteed in the DEWC. Thus, the operation of a writing center, within the Southwestern community or elsewhere, should not be viewed as a threat to the university's

Honor Code. Correspondingly, a writing center cannot regard its university's honor code as an obstruction of the writing process. On the contrary: writing centers must recognize honor codes as enablers of ethically sound writing centers. Finally, these writing centers should be recognized as the healthy products of a properly functioning university honor system.

*Joseph A. Munch*  
*Southwestern University*  
*Georgetown, Texas*

---

#### Works Cited

"Constitution of the Honor System of Southwestern University." *Southwestern University Student Handbook*. Georgetown, TX: Southwestern U., 1997.

"Constitution of the Student Judiciary of Southwestern University." *Southwestern University Student Handbook*. Georgetown, TX: Southwestern U., 1997.

Piedmont-Marton, Elizabeth. "Debby Ellis Writing Center." Brochure. Georgetown, TX: Southwestern U., 2000.

Harris, Muriel. "SLATE Statement: The Concept of a Writing Center." NWCA (Online), 1988. <<http://departments.colgate.edu/diw/NWCA/Startup/Slate.html>> [Accessed 26 Oct 2000].

Herek, Jennifer, and Mark Niquette. "Ethics in the Writing Lab: Tutoring Under the Honor Code." *Writing Lab Newsletter* 14.5 (Jan. 1990): 12-13.

North, Stephen. "The Idea of a Writing Center." *College English* 46.2 (Sept. 1984): 433-446.

Piedmont-Martin, Elizabeth H. "Debby Ellis Writing Center: Annual Report." Georgetown, TX: Southwestern U., 2000.

Thompson, Thomas C. "'Yes, Sir!' 'No, Sir!' 'No Excuse, Sir!': Working With an Honor Code in a Military Setting." *Writing Lab Newsletter* 19.5 (Jan. 1995): 13-14.

---

**THE WRITING LAB**  
N E W S L E T T E R

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

Address Service Requested

Non-profit Organization U.S. Postage PAID Purdue University
--