

# 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

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## ...FROM THE EDITOR...

Although there are frequent calls for more writing center research, we tend to overlook the important research we do within our own institutions—research useful not only in our local contexts but useful also to the whole writing center community.

For example, two articles in this month's issue illustrate what some of us call "institutional research." Helene Krauthamer, faced with choices for selecting computer-assisted writing instruction, investigated a variety of packages and Internet resources and reports her findings for those of us confronting a similar need to add such instruction. And Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch and Sam Racine wanted to know more about tutor time spent in online tutoring as compared to face-to-face tutoring and report on their research project. Such articles exemplify research that is of value beyond their institutionally-instigated goal.

A gentle reminder to those of you chairing regional writing center association conferences: please (*please!*) send me information about your conference as soon as you can. For those writing up budgets for next year, money has to be requested beforehand to fund trips to conferences.

• Muriel Harris, editor

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## How can writing labs assess computer-assisted writing instruction?

### Background

Writing labs face many challenges with respect to using technology, not the least of which is selecting computer software to aid their students in acquiring writing skills. Packages come in a bewildering array of features, prices, hardware requirements, and training needs. Some programs present simple text, while others offer audio and video clips. Some are free, whereas others cost thousands of dollars. Some can be installed using floppy disks, while others require skilled technicians and phone support. Some can be used immediately, while others require intensive training. The emergence of many types of computer software packages raises the questions of what types of programs are most appropriate for our students, how will our students respond, and will the students' writing skills improve after receiving computer-assisted writing instruction (CAWI).

Currently, there are few, if any, resources available that evaluate the ef-

fectiveness of CAWI, despite the great need for teachers and writing center staff to know how to best direct students. There have been some attempts to assess Computer Based Instruction (CBI) in general. For example, Ehrmann states that educational software should be “valuable” and “viable” where value is measured by “evaluation results, awards won, [and] testimonials from users,” and viability is described as the software being “used by enough people for a long

enough period of time that all its investors (original developers, funders, publishers, institutional support staff, faculty, and students) can justly feel that they each have received an adequate return on their own investments in developing, acquiring, and/or learning to use the software” (Ehrmann “On Value, Viability and Success”). Evaluation instruments, however, need to be developed, and we are a long way from a “consumer guide” to help in the selection of the most suitable educational software for particular students.

### Advantages and disadvantages of CAWI

Eric Hobson characterizes most programs as “nothing more than old workbooks and handbooks in electronic form” (215), and even more recent packages are typically “skill and drill” approaches, although some are beginning to include hypermedia. Indeed, many of the programs described in this study fit this description. Grammar exercises in these programs are often multiple-choice, following the same form as those that appear in grammar handbooks. Explanations of rules are also no different. Although students may in some programs type in blocks of text, the programs often cannot read this material, although the students may compare their sentences to the correct models. The only advantages are that feedback is usually immediate, the exercises are automatically scored, and, of course, responses are typed or clicked rather than handwritten. Occasionally, the programs will insert the student’s name in its responses, and some programs have a click and drag feature that allows the user to test out different configurations of word order. Essentially, computers have not revolutionized grammar instruction.

Nevertheless, many students, particularly those with disabilities, seem to prefer to use computers when they are available, as is well documented (Fitzgerald and Koury), and merely using a computer allows students to learn

“worldware” (Ehrmann “Asking”): the use of word processing, email, and the Internet, skills that most people agree are necessary. Simply sitting at a terminal makes students feel that they are learning to use technology, and, considering that keyboarding itself is a skill, they are right. Typing involves making discriminations that handwriting often blurs. Learning to use educational software does make students more aware of computer possibilities and, of course, more comfortable around computers, a real plus given the fact that there may be limited access to computers at home. Thus, there may indeed be advantages in simply using computers as teaching aids.

Furthermore, computer technology allows students to work independently, to take more responsibility for their own learning, possibly enhancing life-long learning skills. These computer programs are almost all self-paced, occasionally pushing students into more advanced levels, but more often letting the student decide which topics to work on and how intensely. Research studies (Jonassen as cited by Reed) point out, however, that not all students do well with more learner control, notably, that low ability students do more poorly with greater learner control, whereas high ability students do better. Reed applies this to interpret some of the contradictory findings of research on the benefits of computer-based writing instruction and in his own research finds that students of low ability require more assistance such as that found in composing process software, whereas students of high ability do best with less assistance, using only word processing programs. Computer-based instruction, in any case, should not mean that the teacher is absent. Further research on this mode of instruction in general (Montague and Kirk) shows that students do best and prefer the lesson when a teacher is guiding the instruction.

Perhaps the biggest advantage of CAWI is its potential to provide indi-

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vidual attention to more individuals; twenty computer terminals can tutor twenty students when there is only one (or no) human tutor available. Also, as Reed points out, with the use of multimedia and other innovating forms of instruction, there is finally the possibility of addressing individual learning styles, something not easily done in the traditional classroom. Of course, computers and learning software are costly, prone to failure, and, if not entertaining enough, run the risk of boring students as well. Computers cannot form meaningful relationships with students, as a tutor supposedly could. On the other hand, students are often enthusiastic about using computers, and some may even prefer working in an environment where there is no risk of personal embarrassment. Frequently, the computer labs are high priority in schools, more so than faculty. The equipment is already available in many places, so the question is mostly about selecting the most suitable software.

The presence of so many programs invites comparison, and the high cost of many of these packages makes it even more important to assess their effectiveness. Several queries about recommendations for software packages have been posted on the listserv for the Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar (ATEG), for example, and teachers are eager to find methods of evaluation. When setting up writing labs or learning centers in general, it would be useful to have some guidance concerning the best, most cost-effective programs.

### Goals

The goal of this study was to conduct a pilot study of the effectiveness of the specific CAWI packages, as well as other resources, in the Writing Center at Bowie State University, with the overall objective of using these findings to make recommendations and to determine future courses of action. The study focused on the responses to and the effects of the educational software installed on the lab computers, also in-

cluding non-technological resources such as worksheets, textbooks, and lab tutors. Ultimately, the goals were to determine whether or not a consistent program of CAWI would result in improved student performance in writing classes, to assess the packages themselves, and to develop viable instruments of software evaluation.

### Project description

The project began during the Spring 1999 semester. First, students in three English Composition I classes were given an orientation to all the resources in the Writing Center and then informed that we were conducting a study of their effectiveness. Students were given a consent form and told that they would be attending one class session per week in the lab. At each session, students selected the lab resource they wished to use, as well as the topic or skill they would practice. At the end of the session, students were given an anonymous survey to submit, although they were not obligated to complete this survey. These surveys were then analyzed each week to determine how many students were participating in the sessions, which resources they were using, what their level of satisfaction with each resource was, how many words they were writing, and what was the quality of the writing as measured by the frequency of error. At the end of the semester, an analysis was done to determine how the students participating in this project fared in comparison with students not participating in the project, looking at final course grades. Also, an assessment was made to determine which lab resources were most consistently used, which received the highest satisfaction ratings, and which resulted in better student performance.

### Writing Center Resources

- **LearningPlus:** This computer application allows the student to work through the stages of the writing process, from invention to editing. The sessions include practice exercises on various

aspects of writing and editing. To use, students must be given Logon names and passwords, available from the Writing Center instructors. [Although initially available on 13 of the 18 computers, in February, approximately a month after the study began, there was no longer access to this program.]

- **Grammar Workouts:** This program allows students to do grammar exercises with immediate feedback on their progress, keeping score of their results. Answers are typically multiple-choice drills, covering many aspects of usage. [This package was available on eight of the 18 stations.]
- **Writing Tutor:** This package covers many aspects of writing, from paragraph topics to proofreading. Very comprehensive, there are 40 topics that are offered with two to four types of exercises each, from five to 93 questions per exercise. A score grid is kept for each student while working but is erased when the student logs out. Personalized homework and rule explanations are offered, and students may print out selected pages. [This package was available on all 18 computers.]
- **Microlab:** This program explains grammatical concepts, as well as drills students on a limited number of topics, allowing students to take a diagnostic test and print out results. [This package was available on three of the stations.]
- **BSU OWL:** This Online Writing Lab [<http://www.bowiestate.edu/academics/artsci/english/writingcenter/writingcenter.htm>] was put together from the handouts and information sheets that were developed by the faculty of the Department of English and Modern Languages at Bowie State University on various topics of writing and grammar instruction. The site includes exercises and answer

keys, as well as publications by the students. Coordinated to fit the grading schema of the department, the site also contains links to other OWLS, as well as an online dictionary, thesaurus, sites of interest to creative writers, and an online *Elements of Style*. [Internet access was available on all the computers.]

- **Internet:** By typing "Writing Skills Centers" in Yahoo searches or the topic of the grammar issue (e.g. "comma splices"), students could access Internet sites with information and activities. In their orientation as well as on signs posted near the computers, students were directed to Online Writing Labs such as the Purdue OWL [<http://owl.english.purdue.edu>]. [Internet access was available on all the computers.]
- **Expressways:** This is a Windows-based, interactive writing software tutorial that guides students through the writing process, allowing them to keep an electronic journal, write, revise, and save drafts on their own disks. [This package was available on all the stations.]
- **Print Materials:** Available on the shelves and bookcases lining the walls of the Writing Center are traditional handouts of grammar and composition topics, exercises, workbooks, handbooks, and textbooks on writing instruction that students may freely access.
- **Tutorials:** Students were eligible to receive private tutorials from the two Writing Center instructors who were generally available at the time of the sessions.

### Results

Although the study began with 38 students signing consent forms, the average number of students completing the surveys each session was 10.4, ranging from a high of 24 on the first day to a low of 1 on two days when the teacher was absent. One explana-

tion is that the students did not desire to do the final item on the survey, asking them to write a short paragraph about their experience. A few actually groaned when they reached this item. Even when assured that they would not be graded on what they wrote, they were still reluctant. Their response did not improve when told that they did not have to complete the entire survey. One reason may be that they were not interested in participating in a study that did not seem to benefit them directly. "Why should I?" was a frequent response, although they continued to use the resources. Some possible solutions to higher participation in future studies are to encourage the students with monetary or other incentives or to more fully explain the purpose of the study and its ultimate benefits. Another observation is that there was lower attendance on days when the instructors were absent, suggesting that computers do not substitute for teachers, supporting the findings of Montague and Kirk.

Although the students were free to choose their own stations, not all the resources were equally available. Only Writing Tutor, Expressways, the Internet, and the BSU OWL were on all the computers. LearningPlus became unavailable after February, Microlab was available on only three stations, and Grammar Workouts was available on only eight. Given this fact, it is difficult to draw any firm conclusions about which resources were most popular with the students. A better research design would have equal access to all resources, or examine only those resources that were equally represented. It is notable (though perhaps obvious), however, that the students in the study did not use their lab time to work with print materials, such as the handouts, workbooks, or library materials that were also introduced to them at their orientation. Likewise, they did not request private tutoring from the lab instructors, who were usually avail-

able at the time of these sessions. This supports the observations of others (Fitzgerald and Koury) that students do prefer CAWI to all the other lab resources.

Although Writing Tutor, Expressways, the Internet, and the Bowie State University On-line Writing Lab were available on all the computer stations, Writing Tutor was the most used resource in this study. Grammar Workouts, particularly insofar as it was available on only eight stations, was also quite popular, as was the BSU OWL. Expressways was less popular, possibly because the program focuses on the writing process rather than grammar, about which the students were most concerned. Other resources, such as Microlab and LearningPlus were not as available, so their lower use is expected. The Internet was also used for a lower number of sessions; one explanation is that the students were more interested in using resources that were available only on the lab computers. The students used the BSU OWL more often than other OWLs, probably because it had more familiar features.

The Average Satisfaction of all the resources ranged at a satisfactory level, from 2.50 for Microlab to 3.50 for LearningPlus (where 4 = Extremely satisfied and 1 = Not satisfied at all). The more commonly used resources (Grammar Workouts, Writing Tutor, Expressways, and the BSU OWL) are in a very close range from 2.85 - 2.88, indicating no dramatic preferences for one resource over another. The high score of 3.50 for LearningPlus, although rated by only three users, suggests that this resource should be restored to the computer lab, and the score of 3.00 for the Internet suggests that more users should be directed to the Internet resources. The mean Average Satisfaction is 2.92, suggesting a general satisfaction with the CAWI resources.

As mentioned earlier, the students were reluctant to write paragraphs, and few wrote the requested paragraph of 100

words. The average word count is highest for LearningPlus (43.00) and lowest for the BSU OWL (6.5). These numbers may reflect the conscientiousness of the student selecting the resource, rather than the effectiveness of the resource itself. To access LearningPlus, the students need to request a password from the lab instructors, whereas the other resources are immediately available. However, LearningPlus does encourage students to write passages in the program, and the only other program doing this is Expressways. Expressways, however, has a lower than average word count (17.36), surprisingly lower than Grammar Workouts, which does not encourage students to write at all. Microlab also has a higher than average number in this category, again perhaps implying more about the students selecting the resource. This program was available on only three stations, so the users had to deliberately select the computer station. The program itself does not require the user to write passages. There were no significant differences among the error counts for these resources.

Students who received "A" had the highest average number of sessions (4), whereas the students who received "D" had the lowest (1.8). Surprisingly, the students who received "F" had a higher average number of sessions (3.0) than the students who received "B" (2.8), though possibly these numbers are not significantly different. The students who received "C" had the second highest average number of sessions (3.6). Overall, these results suggest that increased lab attendance does have a slight improvement on grades. In comparison with students not participating in the study, 100% of the students who got an "A" participated in the study, 57% of the students who got a "B" participated in the study, 35% of the students who got a "C" participated in the study, 67% of the students who got a "D" participated in the study, and 13% of the students who got an "F" participated in the study.

The final grade distribution for the students using the various resources revealed no dramatic differences among the resources, although the Average Grade for Internet users is the highest at 2.2 and for Microlab users is the lowest at 1. Writing Tutor, Grammar Workouts, and Expressways are all identical at 1.9, and the BSU OWL is slightly lower at 1.67.

### Conclusion

The study illustrates some of the problems involved in doing research of this sort. Poor participation, software failures, overlapping variables, and other complexities arise that limit the interpretation and generalizability of the results. A better experimental design would have only one variable, examine only one package, and include a control group that does not use any software programs. On the other hand, Reed suggests that with the increased use of computers, we are well past the point of considering not using computers in instruction and suggests instead that researchers study the effects of various forms of computer instruction on varied learning styles. The measure of success would be more clearly defined (e.g. error reduction, final exam grade) so that it would not be conflated with attendance, effort, or attitude. Participation would either be mandatory for all or rewarded with incentives that do not affect grades.

The need still exists for better assessment of writing software, but the question still remains as to how to perform this assessment. Some of the factors examined in this study proved to be difficult to assess. For example, is a successful program one that students use or one that students like? One that results in more writing or one that results in fewer errors? One that is used by students who get higher grades or one that is used by students who get lower grades? None of the programs considered in this study proved to be dramatically different in any of these regards. On the other hand, CAWI in

general was clearly preferred to traditional handouts, workbooks, and instructors as resources.

After completing this study, I was asked to become the director of the Reading/ Writing Laboratory at the University of the District of Columbia and acquire software. Based on these results, we have installed LearningPlus and Writing Tutor on our computers, but not Grammar Workouts, MicroLab, or Expressways. Although LearningPlus is difficult to install, the program includes a reading component, and it received the highest satisfaction ratings of this study. Writing Tutor is easy to install, contains very comprehensive grammar coverage, and had good satisfaction ratings, so it was selected over Microlab, which did not seem as comprehensive, and Grammar Workouts, which was unavailable. We did not select Expressways because we had another writing program that we were given permission to use. We have also begun the construction of our own OWL. I am conducting further evaluative studies of the software in the lab, using some of the questions from the evaluation instrument used in this study, and extending the reach of the evaluation to programs for reading instruction too.

To further evaluate CAWI and help writing centers make decisions regarding software acquisitions, I have constructed a website that is currently housed at <http://www.geocities.com/hkrauthamer/maincawi.htm>. I hope this site will attract other reviews of software so that this selection process will become easier and more productive.

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*Note: The data for this paper is published in the original version, posted at <http://www.geocities.com/hkrauthamer/pilot.html>.*

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## Difficult Students

(cont. from p. 16)

fully for the following, usually unspoken, problems: 'Fear of inadequacy.... Inability to articulate the problem.... Mistaken notions of what teachers want.... Lack of interest in writing.... [and] Lack of familiarity with normal writing processes' (60-61). Students may also be unfamiliar with the very specific notion of analytical writing. In *Listening to the World: Cultural Issues in Academic Writing*, Helen Fox illustrates the resistance of "world majority students," socialized into a subtle, indirect, digressive style of writing, to the narrowly focused, explicit, and plainly logical style of academic writing in North America.

### Conclusion

We all make mistakes, lack appropriate strategies, need to admit our need to learn. Our own institutionalized shame—we are merely writing instructors hired to deal with the mess beneath the notice of tenured elites—should also not lead to careless, hasty, or indifferent tutoring. Nor should frustration or failure be hidden. One tutor spoke of how helpful it was to know others have problems. She would

have liked to talk about feeling like a failure. Perhaps the most emphatic lesson of the seminars was that we should consult one another as much as possible.

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## Calendar for Writing Centers Associations

October 25-27: 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>>.

# TUTORS' COLUMN

## Oh, comma on!

A comma here, a comma there,  
 Why not put one everywhere?  
 They fit so well; they look so nice.  
 Who cares about a comma splice?  
 And if I should have one or two,  
 I guess that's just tough luck for you!  
 (Omitting commas here or there,  
 I'm sure no one will really care).  
 So what's the fuss? I must admit,  
 I'm really quite fed up with it!

The persona of this poem seems to be suffering from what we might call comma indifference syndrome (CIS), something I have seen all too often in my experiences with writers at the Saginaw Valley State University Writing Center. But this appears to be only a small part of a larger comma “epidemic” of sorts—an epidemic that takes its toll on even the most proficient writers. At some point, we have all been frustrated by this tiny punctuational cornerstone of written English. And understandably so, for the comma has power that no other mark possesses: simply inserting or removing it can change meaning entirely. Although I have not witnessed it personally, I'm sure this little mark has sparked fuming confrontations among English teachers, with the only resolution being an affirmation of the comma's ambiguous nature.

However, as the persona of the poem above shows us, teachers and experienced writers are not alone in their frustrations over comma usage. In fact, students are the ones who are tormented most. Imagine knowing that your professor wants a grammatically perfect paper, and you cannot decide whether to put a comma in a sentence that looks awfully long! This is what students deal with—doubt, fear, perplexity—all because of a little comma.

So, we must ask ourselves, “Why does such a little mark cause so many problems?” and “What can we do to deal with these problems?”

### Hypotheses

Since comma usage is so complex, it would be safe to say that the reasons students have problems with commas are also far from simple. However, there are several likely possibilities for students' problems, most of which involve either lack of basic knowledge of comma usage or students' attitudes about commas.

#### 1. *Overlooked or forgotten rules*

More often than not, the root of students' problems with commas is a simple ignorance of the rules. This seems somewhat surprising, since, by college, students have been instructed on this matter repeatedly. However, considering the wide range of comma usage, it is not so hard to understand that students might occasionally miss a rule. Additionally, students often receive their last formal grammar instruction at the beginning of their high school years. It is possible that a rule they once knew—and followed diligently, mind you—is now lost amongst the wealth of other knowledge they have learned.

#### 2. *Misapplied rules*

One can never know what goes on in a student's mind. (Indeed, one may not want to know!) But, once again considering the multitude of comma rules, it seems safe to say that the odds of these rules becoming jumbled and mixed together are high. With this in mind, we can understand that students may simply “mess up” in their application of a comma rule. For instance, consider the compound sentence “My dog ate all of

his food, and my sister gave him some more.” Most students know that in a compound sentence, the comma goes before the coordinating conjunction. In rare instances, I have seen papers in which students reversed the order. It is clear that the students “knew” the rule—at least there was an attempt at avoiding a run-on sentence. But for one reason or another, something went awry in their thinking. In most cases, simply pointing out the “flip-flop” is enough to jolt students' memories.

#### 3. *“When in doubt . . .”*

This attitude might occur in the student mentioned earlier whose professor required a grammatically perfect paper. Pressed for time and riddled with uncertainty, the student might simply decide to use a comma in the sentence, even though it is not necessary. As seen in this case, some students tend to think that commas are the panacea for all of their punctuation problems. Sadly, commas may be the only form of punctuation they know, therefore becoming their crutch in uncertain situations.

#### 4. *Aesthetic effect*

Let's face it, folks; commas are cute. They just hang there on the paper, their curved form dangling helplessly between clauses and nouns, innocently unaware of the domineering effect they have on readers whose eyes curiously peruse the page. Okay, maybe not that cute. But for the writer with a limited repertoire of punctuation, commas serve to add a sense of sophistication (or so it seems) to an otherwise redundant pouring out of words. A paper littered with commas might not always be the result of simple ignorance, or rule misapplication, or a careless attitude; rather, it might simply be the

writer's attempt to "take it up a notch"—an attempt to use the resources available in order to achieve a higher standard. The over-usage must be addressed, but seen in this light, it can also be admired.

### Solutions

Considering the complex nature of comma usage and the many possibilities behind students' misuse of commas, there might be few concrete solutions to the comma "epidemic." However, that does not mean we should give up; there are several things we can try.

#### 1. A simple analogy

An analogy relating commas to real life might help the comma abuser/over-user get the point. Simply ask students to consider their friends: we like our friends; we go places with our friends; we spend lots of time with our friends. But do we really want our friends around 24 hours a day, following our every move? Hopefully, students will get the point: friends are great, but they have their place. In the same way, commas are a great tool. However, just as friends overstaying their welcome can be a pain, overusing commas can dilute their effectiveness and burden readers.

#### 2. New friends

From the analogy above, students can also see that they like their different friends because of the variety they provide. That same variety is available for punctuation: one need only pull out a grammar handbook to discover several alternatives to using a comma. We can introduce students to colons, semicolons, dashes, parentheses, and a whole slew of different punctuation opportunities. We cannot simply assume that students are readily familiar with these alternatives. (While I was aware of colons, semicolons, etc., I rarely used them at all until college.) Taking the time to show students how to use these forms will benefit not only the students themselves, but also the

teachers and professors who read their papers. In addition, that student who wants to sound more sophisticated can learn how to do it the right way.

#### 3. Practice

The only way we can effectively learn something is through practice. While students have probably been drilled to death on commas throughout their educational careers, a little more practice can never hurt. Books full of comma drills are readily available for this purpose, but Professor Diane Boehm, the Writing Program Director and one of our Writing Center Coordinators at SVSU, suggests that it would be more beneficial for students to learn from their own work. She highlights three steps that must take place if students are to correct their errors.

First, students must identify their errors. Ideally, they would do this themselves; however, the "red pen" of professors and collaboration in a tutorial session can also be useful identification tools. Once identification takes place, the reason for the error must be discovered: an understanding of the faulty thinking process is a crucial step. Did the student just place the comma randomly? Did the student place the comma by ear? Questions like these can be useful for determining where the student went wrong. Once students understand their thinking errors, they can work to learn a new, correct pattern of thinking—a pattern that must be reinforced through repetition. By identifying errors and the flawed thinking processes behind them, then replacing those processes with correct ones, we can help students recognize their difficulties and give them the tools to overcome them.

#### 4. LIES

As I have noted, the number of comma rules is often overwhelming; indeed, it is almost impossible to know each rule verbatim without consulting a grammar handbook. How can we break this conglomeration down into something students can manage (and

remember)? While categorizing comma usage might have its ill effects, it would seem that a simple, easy-to-remember explanation of the basics would give students at least some guideline to follow. I know that in my experiences attempting to explain comma usage to students, I would often forget a group of rules. The use of the acronym LIES has helped me make commas easier to explain:

- **L(ists)** This is probably the one comma rule that everyone knows. The only problem here is variation: some writers place a comma after all of the items in a list, while others eliminate the comma before the conjunction. This problem can be resolved by simply reminding students to be consistent with whichever form they choose.

- **I(ntroductory Material)** This involves commas that are used following both conjunctive adverbs (*however, indeed, furthermore, et al.*) and dependent clauses (which begin with subordinating conjunctions, such as *after, if, when, et al.*) at the beginning of sentences. I like to use the phrase "They leave you hanging" to describe the effect this material has on readers. A useful tool here is the Drop Test: alternatively covering up each part of a sentence to see if the other could stand alone as a sentence. By covering up what comes after these "introductory" words and the clauses that contain them, students can usually see that they do not present a whole idea—they only lead into the "meat" of the sentence. It is a good idea to have a grammar handbook available in order to show students different conjunctive adverbs and subordinating conjunctions that indicate when commas are necessary.

- **E(xtra Material)** This is another broad category, but it revolves mainly around parenthetical



expressions and also includes conjunctive adverbs that fall in the middle and at the end of sentences. The Drop Test is useful here as well: have students cover up the word or information in question to see if what remains is a complete sentence. If it is, a comma (or commas) is most likely needed to separate the “extra material” from the rest of the sentence. A sentence exemplifying this might be “My father normally a very prudent man decided to jump into the lake with his clothes on.” Use of the Drop Test will show that the phrase “normally a very prudent man” is not necessary for a complete sentence. It is, therefore, “extra material” and should be set off with commas.

• ***S(entences)*** This category addresses the companion of the comma splices that our disillu-

sioned persona was so insensitive about: run-on sentences. Most students know that if two complete sentences are to be connected with a comma, a coordinating conjunction (*and, but, or, et al.*) must be used. For students whose papers are plagued with run-ons, the Drop Test once again proves effective. Ask students to look for coordinating conjunctions in their sentences; then ask them to consider what comes before and after these words separately. Can both parts stand alone? Does each part have its own subject? Asking questions like these will help students be able to recognize run-on sentences.

These categorizations certainly do not encompass all of the possible uses of commas; however, they do present what I think is a good starting point, as well as a good reference, for students

who are struggling with commas.

## Conclusion

Comma usage is definitely one of the most problematic aspects of writing, and one might, indeed, say that these problems—not to mention their effects—constitute an epidemic of sorts. But the outlook need not be grim; though problems with commas are numerous, there are also a number of ways to approach and address them, some of which I have discussed here. By working with students to clear up misconceptions and help them learn how to correctly and effectively use commas, we can make everyone’s life a whole lot more enjoyable. Rather than proclaiming, “I’m really quite fed up with it!” we will all be able to master, and appreciate the value of, commas.

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## IWCA Scholarship Awards

At the International Writing Centers Conference, in Savannah, on April 12, the IWCA presented the following awards for writing center scholarship published in 2001:

### Book:

Nelson, Jane, and Kathy Evertz, Eds. *The Politics of Writing Centers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001.

### Article:

Balester, Valerie, and James C. McDonald. “A View of Status and Working Conditions: Relations Between Writing Program and Writing Center Directors.” *Writing Program Administrator* 24.3 (2001): 59-82.

## Writing Lab Director Clarke College

The Clarke College English Department invites applications for Writing Lab Director/ English Instructor (One Year Position). Responsibilities: Supervise Writing Lab with student-peer tutoring staff and teach two introductory courses in the English Department. Qualifications: Ph. D. or MFA preferred. Send letter of application and vita to Dr. Gary Arms, Chair, English Department, Clarke College, 1550 Clarke Drive, Dubuque IA 52001.

# Tutor time commitment in online writing centers

## Introduction

As OWLS—online writing labs or centers—have grown in popularity in colleges and universities across the nation, writing center scholars have conducted research about their usefulness, tutoring techniques, and design. (Eric Hobson’s edited collection, *Wiring the Writing Center*, is one recent source that documents the trials and successes of OWLS.) Although research about online writing centers is more prevalent and, to some extent, has legitimized the existence of centers online, we find in our own experience that more research is needed to understand the unique needs of an expanding online writing center.

For example, in the Online Writing Center (OWC) at the University of Minnesota, where we both have been involved in either administration or online tutoring, concerns that demand attention include funding and staffing. Like many online centers, our OWC began as an uncharted adventure. Visualized by a graduate student in our department for a master’s thesis project, the OWC—which uses a web-based interface and asynchronous tutoring through e-mail—began operating in 1997, with a staff of one graduate student working with an average of two clients per week. Now, the OWC attracts up to 200 visitors per week who seek web resources about writing and approximately 15 clients per week who request feedback on written work. As a result of the growing use of the OWC, part-time tutors were hired, and we created training materials as well as temporary administrative positions to guide the center.

The increased use raises many questions about the direction of our OWC. Which faculty and students are likely to use the center? Do we seek further funding for additional tutors? How can

we continue reaching out to our university community and beyond? Can we borrow from models of face-to-face centers? As we explored these questions, we noticed that one of our bottom-line concerns about expansion became a question of time commitment. For instance, in order to staff the OWC efficiently, we have to approximate the weekly time commitments needed per tutor to make the OWC run smoothly. We quickly surmised that time estimates based on face-to-face tutoring centers were not helpful because tutors in the OWC shared anecdotally that they usually spent *almost two hours per client* reading and responding to the clients’ papers in asynchronous sessions. We were surprised by the extent of time spent working online and wondered if the increase was due to technological difficulties in sending and receiving electronic documents or other causes. Furthermore, we were discouraged by reports that online tutoring is not likely to frequently attract students. For example, Muriel Harris notes that “a number of factors suggest that e-mail tutoring will not gain widespread popularity” (6). We concluded that we needed to find out how our online writing center operates in terms of time and tutor commitment so we could make appropriate choices about funding, staffing, and expansion.

In addition, we realized that certain audiences were emerging for the OWC, and we needed to tailor tutoring to their needs. For example, online tutors were concerned about responding to ESL clients; tutors noticed that ESL clients’ requests and tutor responses focused on difficulties with mechanics and grammar instead of global issues. In addition, we noted that graduate students were also clients with unique needs. At the time this study was conducted, graduate students submitted theses and dissertations that required

special attention and which were uncomfortably large projects for our tutors. To address these concerns, we wanted to find out how tutors spent time in their online tutorial sessions.

To help satisfy these goals, we conducted a “tutor-time study” to address our primary research questions. We asked these questions through a survey to find the ways in which our OWC operates in comparison with another face-to-face tutoring center on our campus, and to determine how best to address issues of expansion.

## Background of study

The participants in our study included 17 tutors, all graduate students. Thirteen tutors were from the Student Writing Center, a face-to-face center in the Department of English. Four tutors were from the Online Writing Center in the Department of Rhetoric. Each tutor was given a brief survey. Face-to-face tutors were given print forms; online tutors used an electronic form. After each tutoring session, tutors recorded the total amount of time spent on the tutoring session in minutes and then estimated the ways in which the time was spent. We recognize that tutor estimates may not reflect the exact time tutors spent in these areas; thus, the survey was an informal study, but one we hoped would yield results that would inform our concerns about expansion. Each face-to-face tutor was asked to participate for either two weeks or to complete the survey for 20 tutoring sessions, whichever occurred first. Online tutors were not limited to a two-week period in the study due to the lower volume of tutoring appointments in the OWC at the time the survey was administered.

Questions on the survey asked tutors to identify the following items: the type of session completed (“walk-in”

or “appointment” for face-to-face centers; “online” for tutors working in asynchronous e-mail tutoring sessions); the total amount of time spent on the session; and estimates of how time was spent discussing mechanical, global, technological, or other aspects of writing. The “mechanical” category included aspects such as attention to grammar, punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and general proofreading techniques. “Global” included aspects such as overall organization, development of thesis, use of voice or tone, and large scale revision suggestions. “Technological” referred to aspects of a tutoring session that involved computer use, such as explaining to a client how to retrieve their paper electronically, uploading or downloading documents, or experiencing technical difficulties during either an online or face-to-face tutoring session that used the web. These categories were generated by the tutors and reflected how tutors divided their time. If time was spent on issues other than mechanical, global, or technological, tutors were asked to explain those issues in the “other” category. Also, tutors were asked to indicate if the client was an ESL speaker—again, a distinction suggested by tutors. We reviewed the data and compared the following items: average time spent per session; estimated time spent on mechanical, global, technological, and “other” issues; and estimated time spent on each category for ESL clients.

### Results and discussion

In all, we examined surveys from 228 tutoring sessions: 77 appointments, 106 walk-ins, and 45 online, asynchronous sessions. We found online tutors exceeded face-to-face sessions in total time per session, that appointment and online tutors estimated similar times in each category, and that online sessions had significantly fewer ESL clients reported than face-to-face sessions.

#### ***“What is the average amount of time spent tutoring in an online environment versus a face-to-face environment?”***

Online tutors spent an average of

93.7 minutes per session, more time than face-to-face tutors (see Fig. 1, p. 13). Sixteen of the 45 online sessions extended beyond 90 minutes: nine lasted two hours, two sessions for two and one-half hours, and isolated sessions lasted for four and one-half hours, five, and even as much as six hours. Face-to-face tutors working with appointments—these are scheduled 60-minute time slots—spent an average of 54.9 minutes per session. Nine of the 77 face-to-face appointment sessions surveyed extend their time beyond the appointment, three of which were for an extension of 15 minutes or more. Walk-in face-to-face tutors spent an average of 31.4 minutes per session. These were the most frequent sessions of the study, generating 106 records. Session times varied, with one lasting as long as 85 minutes, but in general, the times were consistently clustered around the average.

Because the average amount of time spent per online session was 93.7 minutes compared to 54.5 for appointments and 31.4 minutes for walk-in sessions in the face-to-face center, we considered this finding an important difference between face-to-face and online (asynchronous) tutoring. But this finding raised additional questions for us. We wondered if additional time spent in asynchronous tutoring related to technology. That is, did technology impede the efficiency of tutorials? According to our findings, the answer is no. Our findings suggest that only 13.6% of time spent tutoring online related to technological problems. Although technological problems perhaps cannot be eliminated completely from online tutoring centers, we are relieved to find that tutors did not estimate the majority of their time spent in this category. After all, with differences in computers, computer languages, browsers, and a variety of email packages, potential problems with technology abound. Rather than technological problems, online tutors in our study suggested that time was spent “transcribing.” It happens that some of our tutors print out documents, respond to the author by writing on the document, and then re-enter those comments elec-

tronically. This practice certainly seems inefficient; we were not aware this practice was occurring and have since addressed it in tutor training.

#### ***“How do online tutors estimate they are spending their time during tutorials?”***

According to our findings, there are strong similarities between online sessions and appointment-based, face-to-face sessions (see Fig. 2, p.13). Tutors in both of these categories indicated that they spent a relative amount of time between global and mechanical issues, with an emphasis on global. Walk-in, face-to-face appointments differed a bit from the other types of sessions in that an average of 50% of total time was estimated as spent dealing with mechanical issues. Figure 2 (p. 13) demonstrates the breakdown of the percentages of time spent in each category for each set of tutors.

In the mechanical category, tutors working online and in face-to-face appointments spent about one-third of their total time, while walk-in tutors spent about half of their total time with mechanical concerns. In the global category, we again find another similarity between tutors with appointments and online tutors: both spent about half of their time in this category. As expected, online tutors spent more time dealing with technological issues (such as uploading and downloading documents); however, face-to-face tutors experienced some issues with technology as well. Unfortunately, tutors did not specify what these technological issues were, and it would be interesting to see how face-to-face and online tutors specified their uses of technology.

Face-to-face tutors (both appointment and walk-in) spent more time in the “other” category than online tutors: 9.7 % of their estimated time. Face-to-face tutors specified that topics in this category usually included discussing the assignment, brainstorming, introducing clients to online research, planning research, discussing source material, discussing audience expectations for papers, and “chatting.” Online tutors spent an average of 4.3% of their

time with “other” issues. Tutors noted that this work included writing, or “transcribing” their comments into written form for the clients to use, including creating language that was free of idioms for an ESL client, and requesting more information about the audience and purpose for the paper submitted.

### **“How do ESL clients shape online tutorial time?”**

While we expected that the Online Writing Center would serve many ESL clients, this study revealed that only a small number of online clients were non-native speakers of English. Face-to-face sessions, both appointment and walk-in, had almost three times as many ESL clients as online sessions. In our survey results, face-to-face, appointment tutors had 33 sessions with ESL clients (42% of their total sessions); walk-in, face-to-face tutors had 31 ESL sessions (30% of their total); online tutors had six sessions where clients were *indicated* as ESL (13% of their total sessions). We use the term “indicated” because online clients are not required to provide any information identifying them as ESL clients—we had to rely on the tutors’ guess.

In addition to finding that our OWC accommodated fewer ESL clients than we expected, we discovered that online ESL sessions took far less time than we expected: 57.5 minutes per online sessions with ESL clients. This amount of time was comparable to face-to-face appointment sessions, in which ESL sessions averaged 56.8 minutes. Amounts of time spent on global, mechanical, technical, and “other” issues were also quite similar to non-ESL sessions (see Fig. 3, p.13).

This survey revealed that instead of ESL clients, graduate students emerged as more frequent clients of our OWC (10 of a total 44 sessions); furthermore, this audience demanded more time from online tutors. Tutors noted that the types of documents graduate students submitted (theses, dissertations) were very labor intensive. Because graduate students continue to be a population we serve, we determined

that tutors need more training to respond to larger documents that may be unfamiliar to them.

Through this study, we recognized that we need to make more efforts to identify the audiences served by our OWC. However, this task is somewhat difficult in online environments. We previously relied on domain traces to learn about our audiences, but we realized that domain traces are ineffective indicators. For example, domains could be traced to two large categories: University of Minnesota domains, and domains outside of our university. In either category, we were often unable to identify audiences beyond these larger classifications. So, for instance, only nine of the 45 sessions—or six clients—that the OWC served were not identified as University of Minnesota students. One client used an email address not consistent with those of our university, but there is nothing to indicate that the other five clients are necessarily not UM students: many students prefer personal email accounts over their UM account. Domains provided are quite common, such as “Hotmail,” “Yahoo,” and “AOL.” (Also, there is nothing to indicate that UM accounts are necessarily UM students—someone could submit a paper using a friend’s account, although we have no anecdotal evidence to support this practice.)

We learned that different means would have to be arranged if we wanted to find out who our specific clients are (perhaps through an online form that asks clients to identify their affiliation, school/workplace). However, this method of gathering demographic information is more problematic online than in face-to-face centers. Whereas face-to-face centers typically ask clients for information at the beginning of a session, online clients often find such requests invasive and simply wish to remain unknown to tutors. In addition, many of the OWC tutoring staff find that asking for demographic information online breaches Internet privacy rights. Clearly, identifying online audiences is a need, and the OWC tutoring staff continues to debate

ways for learning more about their audience.

### **Future plans**

Although the estimates of time from the tutors in this study are not exact, they do reflect tutor impressions of how time is spent in online and face-to-face tutorials. We are very interested in tutor impressions about time spent in both online and face-to-face tutoring and find their responses valuable in directing the future focus of our expanding center. From our results, we discovered that online tutors spend on the average nearly twice as much total time as face-to-face tutors. Considering this finding, we could take a number of directions to address this time commitment. For example, we could try to impose a time limit for online tutoring. Or, we could spend more time training online tutors to comment online rather than transcribing print comments to electronic form. We can also use this finding to determine weekly schedules for tutoring, as well as determining decisions to hire tutors based on need.

The finding that online tutorials were similar to face-to-face, appointment-based tutorials supports our belief that tutors are focusing on global as well as mechanical concerns, and that technology issues are not an overwhelming obstacle in online tutoring. We are encouraged by the responses from tutors in this regard. Finally, the informal study helped us identify the populations that the Online Writing Center serves. We anticipate planning ways to work more effectively with audiences such as ESL and graduate student clients, and we look forward to continuing efforts to expand the Online Writing Center.

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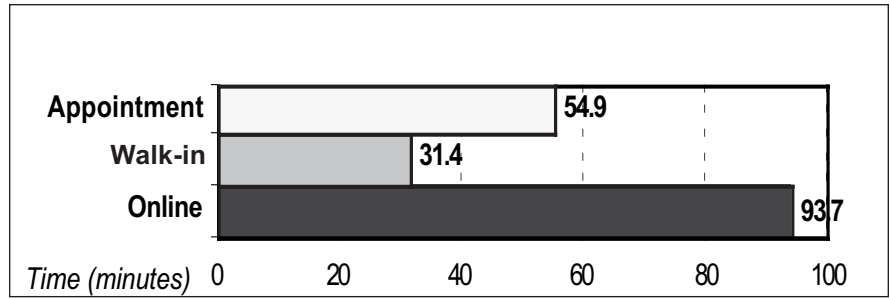


Fig. 1. Total Tutor Time

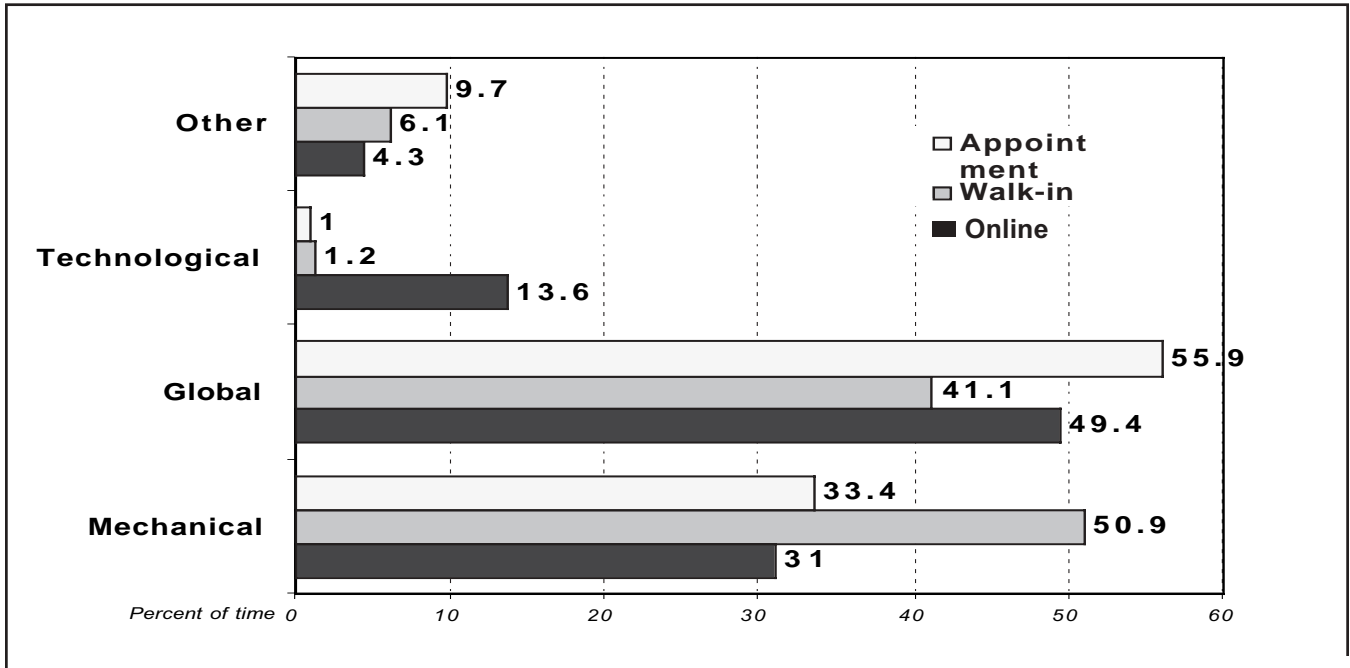


Fig. 2: Percent of Time in Each Category

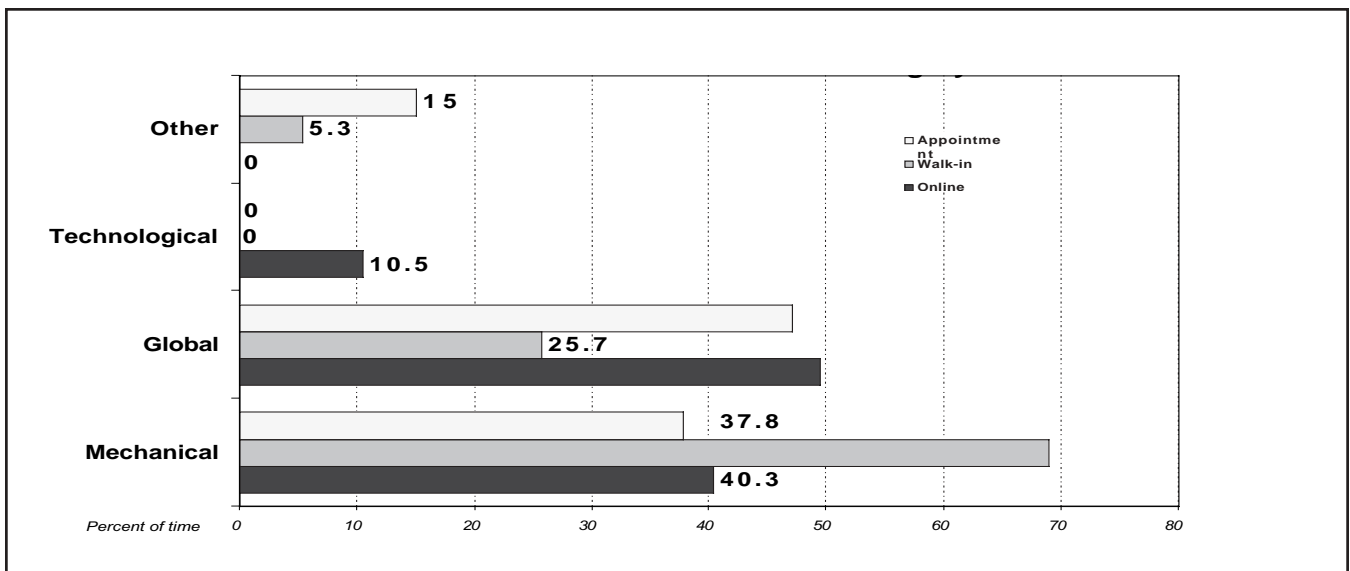


Fig. 3. Percent of ESL Time in Each Category

# On difficult students (and difficulty in general) in the writing tutorial

## Us and them

One year I tutored a student almost weekly. K wrote with little understanding of her topics and less of English grammar. She showed little improvement, and I began not to look forward to her appointments. In our first session the following year, she told me that she was enrolled in two third-year Sociology courses, and was under academic warning: she needed a C+ average to remain at York. She wanted help with an essay in her course kit that she had volunteered to summarize in a seminar, but then found she did not understand. It was written in fairly demanding sociological prose, and I found a more readable essay in the kit and recommended she change to it. Then I went back to the first essay to see what in particular she didn't understand. I asked her if she had looked up the word "magnitude." I don't have a dictionary, she said. I said, impatiently, that she had to buy a dictionary now, this minute. (When students bring in an essay topic they haven't understood, because they haven't looked up key words, I assume panic. It doesn't even occur to me they may not own a dictionary.) K did not return. During that last session what I wanted to say was "You have no chance of passing these courses;" instead I told her to get a dictionary. The question here is, where does the difficulty lie, in K or in me.

Last year we (writing tutors in the Centre for Academic Writing) held three seminars on the subject of difficult students, in the context of writing tutorials. The questions asked were: What counts for you as a difficult student? How do you deal with them and with your response to them? In each session we found ourselves defining "difficult" and spinning into difficult tutors and the difficulties of the sys-

tem. The consensus was that there *are* difficult students—those with painfully weak writing skills or psychological problems—but also that much apparent difficulty is in the eye (inattention, inexperience, misunderstanding) of the tutor. It also became clear that the best strategy for any kind of difficulty is for tutors to talk to one another as much as possible.

There are kinds of difficulty that are typical and inherent in the task, which is to improve the student's writing and critical skills. The typical student wants help understanding the topic, writing an introduction, developing a thesis, reorganizing a draft, and above all, editing the paper. In our discussions we found that the typical rather than difficult student will interfere with the job we are supposed to do because of (1) Desire for editing, (2) Level of education, inappropriate for university, (3) Passivity, and (4) Personal problems.

## "Please proofread my paper"

The desire for editing meets a corresponding inclination in tutors to reshape the student's prose into something acceptable. Also it's easier to edit than to deal with problems more intractable than syntax. Writing tutors are told not to edit, but many of us admitted to doing some editing in order, we added defensively, to teach some grammar, model the right way to proofread. "If I see improvement in big issues," one tutor said, "I'll edit." Other tutors spoke of "demanding" students, who want us to "fix" their paper, who exhibit a "learned helplessness," or who express annoyance if their expectations—that we edit the paper—are not fulfilled. One new tutor, responding to student expectations, was relieved to hear that she need not read

over the entire paper in the hour. She felt anxiety, she said, as the hour expired, and there were still pages to read. The relevant strategy here is to read the paper quickly, if length allows, for general problems of structure and development (topic sentences on their own may reveal these), and only then move on to the sentence level. If students only want or require editing, because clarity is an issue, I will do two pages, ask them to do the next two, looking for similar problems, and then go over what they did or did not find. With students who make occasional mistakes, and in general with all students, the best advice is to say "Read your sentences aloud." The plodding ear can hear what the speeding eye overlooks.

## Out of their depth: Desperate students

There are students with poor writing skills or undeveloped critical skills who may be registered in courses with complex reading assignments. To some degree this is the typical first year student who comes to the Writing Centre. The typical becomes the difficult when we are presented with garbled pages by students begging for help. Some tutoring hours can be excruciating. One tutor remembers feeling a sense of dread whenever a particular student had an appointment. The student was motivated and kept coming, but with pages of garbled prose. She was on probation, and desperate, but there was very little to be done. Most of us have met students in this situation. One of my students, in second year, not ESL, had been asked to summarize and discuss an essay by T.S.Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," and to decide whether Hulme and Santayana were as conservative as Eliot. She had several pages of rambling, hard-to-follow text

in which the phrase “order of academics” and the word “meteorocracy” occurred frequently. There was no sign that she had read and understood Eliot or anyone else. When I suggested that “meritocracy” or “mediocrity” might be the word she had in mind (heard in a lecture) she guessed “mediocrity,” but did not know what it, or “conservative”, meant. I spent the hour trying to simplify the topic as much as possible (especially difficult with topics designed to show how clever the professor is) and provide a structure for her next draft. Another student had been asked to write a paper on racism in the media using concepts from the course lectures and a collection of feminist theory. So far she had cobbled together three pages of unacknowledged quotations from the critics, sometimes merging, sometimes severing sentences she did not understand. Again, my job was to extricate two or three concepts she had grasped and show her how to apply these to a text. The consensus here is that even if the student is not up to university work, our job is to do what we can, and perhaps in the extreme case learn to say “I can’t help you.”

### **Passivity and writer’s block**

Passivity (a code word for frightened, timid, ignorant, or unintelligent students) is a problem with many dimensions that are mainly typical. Students bring an essay topic with words they don’t understand and haven’t looked up in a dictionary. They return week after week with the same problems, not having thought about them on their own. They listen, without entering into dialogue. Or they ask us to write down a comment or suggestion. There is a temptation among tutors to hold forth, when we happen to know something about the topic, brightly exhibiting our stifled expertise to a worshipful audience of one. This can be useful to the student, in moderation, encouraging her to think aloud in response. In excess this can stifle the student. There is also a temptation to take control, tell the student what to do, revise the paper. This will produce ador-

ing fans, not independent writers. Some students will encourage us to take this role. One tutor described a student who worked hard at getting her to put a lot of energy into the project, care about it. “She wanted me to take responsibility for how well she had done on the assignments. She emphasized her imminent deadlines. Also, she wouldn’t leave.” The issue here was one of boundaries. This student was trying to get around the implicit boundaries between tutor and student. There are times when it is necessary to be explicit about our own expectations and ground rules.

Students with some form of “writer’s block” are frequent enough to be typical. Often they’ve done some reading, taken notes, but “don’t know where to begin.” Such students may simply misunderstand the writing process, especially its initial messiness. They may think they need a thesis or a plan before they can begin writing, and for some of them it may be appropriate to work on these elements. Others are relieved to hear about writer-based prose, feeling freed from the need to get it right the first time. I find it useful to ask students who “can’t get started” to write an introductory paragraph during the session, which we can then appraise together.

### **Egotism and beyond**

If the typical in itself is difficult and all too easy to get wrong, there are students who go well beyond the typical. Some display various brands of egotism. One student complained bitterly about D’s I could see were deserved, telling me he was American and knew his rights and would sue if his grades did not improve. I tried soothing his injured pride, without success, and eventually wrote a report for the committee that dismissed his complaint of anti-Semitism against his professor. Other tutors have experienced resistance, hostility, surliness. The writing tutorial can be a very personal relationship, with quite a lot of neediness on one side, and we should keep in mind how

potentially shaming the experience is for students told their work is inadequate, inept, inferior. They may well respond defensively with shyness and discouragement or with inappropriate anger against their teachers or tutors. They may find it hard to listen to, never mind accept, criticisms and corrections. We are not counselors, but we should make allowances for the strategies with which students respond to shame. I find it useful to place their work in context. I tell them 3000 students come to the Writing Centre with similar problems. I suggest they notice how many students sit silently in class, afraid that they alone do not understand, afraid to speak and expose their stupidity. I try to be encouraging whenever possible.

Stress, anxiety, serious family difficulties may make students demanding, more interested in talking about their difficulties than the essay topic. There was some inconclusive discussion about our role here. Some tutors prefer to accede to the student’s agenda, for a while, and advise counseling if that seems appropriate. Others prefer to reframe the session, tell the student we only deal with writing. Some students may be more seriously disturbed; a few tutors spoke of having been threatened. One student was observed hanging around in the hall, walking unexpectedly into his tutor’s office. Some difficulties arise from gender. The best advice here is to leave the office, report the problem to the Director, call security. There’s no need to deal with serious or even typical problems on our own.

### **Assignments and instructors from hell**

There are times when the difficulty lies with the professor or the system. The essay topic is poorly constructed, vaguely explained, or lacking entirely, the students told to concoct their own. Or a grade may strike us as unfair. When students complain about grades we can see are justified, and we confirm the grade with precise explana-

tions of the essay's problems, they usually, if grudgingly, demur. When the grade seems unjustified, we can advise the student to approach the instructor and ask for a rewrite or reconsideration. We can make the student aware of her rights. We can try to boost her morale, focus on the next essay. We can try not to criticize the instructor, difficult as it may be not to voice our disgust. The problem here is partly systemic: not enough time, too many students in a class, unrealistic reading lists, incompetent faculty. These problems are beyond our scope.

### Difficult tutors

For almost an hour we are alone, warts and all, with a student who has come to us for help. There are difficult tutors, and tutors responsible for difficulty. Very difficult students are rare; our problems often arise from our own inexperience and error. We should also be aware of our own proneness to shame. We too may fear incompetence

or failure, have sessions with students with whom we cannot but fail. I was present when a tutor speaking with insufficient tact about a student's misunderstanding of the topic drove her to tears. I made a similar mistake myself when I happened to see another tutor's student in his absence. We had the topic and a xeroxed article on immigration and said she needed guidance. When I asked what she meant by guidance, she was vague, halting in her speech. When I asked what she had done so far and she said "Nothing," I told her, a little brusquely, that it was important to do some work first, then come in. I went over the topic with her, asking if she knew where to find the "proposed changes" to Canada's immigration act. She said no. Had she consulted her instructor? No. I advised her to go to her instructor and to the reference desk in the library. She began to cry as she got up to go. I asked her to stay and found out that she had a disability (a childhood stroke,

difficulty reading and writing) and worked with a syntax tutor and a content tutor. In tears she told me that, unlike everyone else, everything was hard for her. Mortified at my initial brusqueness, I talked about her strength, how much I admired her, and about the myth that everyone else was fine. The difficulty here was mutually constructed, I think; We didn't contextualize, I wasn't observant.

### Further reading

In general most of us don't know how to handle serious ESL problems with expression and comprehension. In "Tutoring ESL Students: Issues and Options," Muriel Harris and Tony Silva make a number of useful suggestions about working with ESL students who are insistent about editing. In *Teaching One-to-One: The Writing Conference*, also by Muriel Harris and essential reading for writing tutors, Harris recommends that we listen care-

*(continued on p. 6)*

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