By popular demand (and a renewed burst of creative energy), "Schwenck" returns to the pages of the WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER with more "Great Moments in Writing Lab History." For those newer members of our newsletter group who are not acquainted with earlier "Great Moments . . .," Schwenck is also known as Bill Demaree, a grad student in English who is one of the senior tutors--and founders--of Purdue's Writing Lab and our official "artist-in-residence."

Though the rest of us may not be so gifted in the graphic arts, do continue to send in articles, questions, suggestions, announcements, names of new members, and those much appreciated donations of $3 (with checks made payable to me) to:

Muriel Harris, editor
WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER
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SEE YOU AT CCCC

The CCCC's Special Interest Section for Writing Lab Directors to be held March 13 at 3:30 in Washington, D.C., promises to be one of the most exciting and informative sessions at this year's convention. Heading the session will be keynote papers on the theoretical foundations for individualized instruction given by Mark E. Smith of Northern Michigan University and Judy Fishman of Queens College, CUNY. Following these papers, we will divide into small informal workshop groups conducted by leaders in the field of individualized instruction and basic writing. Workshops will cover such topics as training peer tutors, developing materials, conducting research, establishing public relations, as well as using the writing process as rationale for a campus-wide writing center and establishing programs for the learning disabled and programs for humanities courses. The materials exchange table will also be set up as a resource in developing materials for our Labs. Be sure to plan to attend the session to hear and share new ideas with Lab Directors from across the country.

Lil Brannon
University of North Carolina-Wilmington

Tutor's Manual Available

Copies of The Tutoring Experience, a manual for tutors who work in the Writing Lab at Northeast Missouri State University and written by the Director, Phyllis Shackett, are available at a price of $1.00 each, to cover postage. Write to:

Phyllis Shackett
Writing Lab
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Northeast Missouri State University
Kirkville, Missouri 63501
In Praise of Verbs

Once upon a time, a young man who could not distinguish between sentences and non-sentences came to the Writing Clinic. I explained that a sentence needed a subject and a verb, that a subject named what the sentence was about, and that a verb told something about the subject. He and I worked diligently, but by the end of the quarter he still confused sentences and non-sentences.

I was elated when he returned to try again in winter quarter but discouraged when my teaching techniques still didn't reach him. Nevertheless, we parted as friends.

Whether it was friendship or determination that motivated him, I don't know, but he reappeared in the spring. By that time I had said to myself, "Enough of this--let's try a different attack." So we did. We concentrated on verbs. That approach worked, and thus, ever since, I have preached the doctrine that the verb is the key to the puzzle of an English sentence.

My staff and I find that students grasp sentence structure much more easily when we begin with verbs than they did when we began with subjects, perhaps because sentences usually contain several nouns and confused students hazily equate all nouns with possible subjects. How do we help them spot verbs? First, as a sort of "verb screening" test, we give them the patterns "I__, You__, He__, It__"; we explain that if a word can make sense in one of the blanks, it can be a verb. We run through some obvious examples--see and think vs. desk or with--and have the student try a short checklist. Then we explain that if the sentence has two or more words that fit in the blanks, the verb is the word that would change if the time (tense) of the sentence changed. For illustration and practice, we use sentences such as these:

The lost dog looked hungry.

The French chef prepared a dish of cooked carrots.

The popcorn spilled in the theater makes a mess.

We also have the student memorize the "Big-Five": is, am, are, was, were.

Having found the verb (or verbs), students can readily select the subject from among the other nouns by asking the question "Who?" or "What?" in front of the verb. The answer will be the subject. Being able to find verbs and subjects is often all the grammar students need to know because with that knowledge, they can identify the basic sentence unit and learn how to join or separate the units.

However, if we see a need to pursue grammar, we explain that the direct object of the verb answers the question "Who?" or "What?" after an action verb, that a subject complement follows a linking verb, and so on. Thus, analyzing a sentence becomes like playing dominoes or working a jigsaw puzzle, for each part of a sentence is linked to another. The key piece is, of course, the verb.

Lorraine Perkins
St. Cloud State University

Do you remember that questionnaire which went out with the January Newsletter? Professor Evans has received only sixteen so far. He can't draw meaningful conclusions from such a small sample, so if you want results please send your response.

"Proving We Did It"

This paper is not on evaluating writing, and it is not on evaluating writing lab staff. Having made those two statements, I must gainsay myself and say that indirectly it is on both these topics but on much more as well. Proving to the university in general, and to those with the pursestrings in particular, that a writing facility has been effective and useful takes a plan of action that includes several different thrusts. All of the parts of the effective whole, however, must be included before a writing lab director can say forcefully and with certainty that the lab is a necessary part of the university. The more force there can be to that statement, the better.

The first thing a writing lab needs is a clear set of goals. When the Illinois State University Writing Center was planned and established three years ago, it was formed around certain expectations that had grown from careful study and assessment of this university's needs. Not only had I and my assistant visited several labs at other
that no tutor ever has to cope with a situation where he or she cannot answer a student's question or solve a writing problem.

The third requirement for a successfully accountable lab is accurate record keeping. Before I set up the Center at Illinois State, I not only visited other labs, but I also attended every session on writing labs at every conference I could find. The one piece of advice that I heard on every front, both at conferences and at individual labs was that the successful lab director must insist on the staff keeping accurate records. Whatever good report the lab may have across campus, when the deans come to check, they want to know how many students came, how often they came, and what they did with their time. This point may be self-evident, but it is the one that is most easy to overlook in the busy day-to-day activity of helping students. Tutors need to be reminded of the importance of records and double checked to make sure that activities are being regularly recorded.

At the Writing Center we have two cross checks on attendance. Tutors write on a log sheet the name of the student with whom they have worked, the referring faculty member (if there is one), and the time spent. This information is then transferred to cards so that anyone can tell quickly how much time is spent in total with each student. In addition, the tutor writes in a student file folder exactly what he or she did with the student and adds any comments for the next visit in case a different tutor should have to take over. These comments are invaluable in case a faculty member should come asking about student work in the Center. Meantime, the secretary sends out notices every week to every referring instructor telling which students came to the Center, which did not, and how many times the students did come. This task sounds grueling, but it is worth the trouble. Before the Center had a secretary, the faculty members working in the Center kept up all the records. Though it sounds like busy work, it is vital.

Mayhap even more important than record keeping, university life being what it is, are good press and visibility. Writing lab staff have to be willing to come when called. The Writing Center staff give workshops throughout the campus and community. If a dean calls with a question about what to do with a split infinitive, even if his problem is just a divided compound verb, the Center had better be able to answer the question. If an education teacher
gives his
students in primary education a test on language arts and finds out that they all think that the eight parts of speech include predicates, the Center had better be able to help those potential teachers. The point to all this activity is to let the university or college know that the lab has things to offer everyone. I, as director, try to have a complete supply of texts for writing courses on hand for any faculty member who wants to browse and a good selection of current research for any graduate student or faculty member who wants to find a quick research reference. We want the community as a whole to know that we are here and are willing to help.

Each year I write a report of the Center's activities. That report is included in the Instructional Development Activities for the year. These activities are published in a campus-wide booklet telling everyone what is going on. Meanwhile, during the year when someone from the Center goes somewhere or does a workshop in the community, I make sure that the event gets in the University Report that goes out around campus. If the Center sponsors a conference or brings in a visiting consultant, the local paper hears about the occasion. These things may sound very self-important, but they are essential to the healthy image of a writing lab.

The last and most important criteria for letting the authorities know that we are accountable for good work is having satisfied clientele. In the case of the Illinois State University Writing Center, the clientele is quite large and varied. Those students who have been tutored must be sent away with the assurance that they have learned something. This assurance comes in several ways. We administer and save pre-and post-writing samples. We also keep records of grades and improvement so that students will not just have the vague feeling that they are getting better. At the end of each semester, we ask students to give subjective summaries of their experiences in the Center. We also send questionnaires to faculty who have used the Center so that they, too, can give a response and evaluation of the effect the tutoring has had on their students. One other form of evaluation has been helpful to me as the director. Each semester we ask tutors to fill out a questionnaire about their experience in the Writing Center. The tutors tend to be quite brutally honest in their responses. Some of the most effective improvements I have made over the years have come from these tutors' comments. They have helped the Center to be accountable by helping us to be much more effective.

For instance, at first we had no clear set of rules for tutors to follow in their work in the Center. On the way to 4 C's in 1977 two graduate tutors wrote up some strong rules and recommendations. They were tougher than I might have set myself, but they came from the tutors. By enforcing those rules, our staff has managed to help each other be better tutors. And I can say to any visiting administrator, "Here is how we tutor." Everything, from the content of staff meetings to the hours of operation, has been affected by tutor recommendations.

These then are the elements which make up a successful response to those in the larger university community who control our existence. We must begin and continue with clear goals, have a well-trained staff, keep accurate records, maintain visibility, and be able to demonstrate a satisfied clientele. Following are a few articles that might add to the area of accountability, but writing labs need help in this field. As the eighties begin and enrollments shrink, we will be called on more and more often to prove our worth.

References

Harris, Muriel. "Evaluation: The Process for Revision," Basic Writing, 4(Spring/ Summer 1978), 82-90. (This entire volume is on evaluating writing.)


McCracken, Nancy. "Evaluation/Accountability for the Writing Lab," Writing Lab Newsletter, 3 (February 1979), 1-2.


Janice Neuleib
Illinois State University
Our Writing Lab at Delta State University is fairly new, and we are now operating under a Title III grant so we will need to pre-and post-test out students. I am very much opposed to standardized tests as a means of measuring writing ability and am looking for a holistic scale or some means of evaluating actual student writing. I would appreciate any information you could send me concerning such instruments.

I have had students do some journal writing and find that they enjoy it very much; however, I don't know how to teach them to convert their journal entries into topics for paragraphs and essays in the standard modes. I would appreciate very much suggestions for using journal writing in writing exercises.

If Writing Lab Newsletter readers have information to share, I would appreciate their replying either to the Newsletter or writing to me at the following address: Lillian Smith, Director, Learning Skills Center, Ewing 361, Delta State University, Cleveland, Mississippi 38733.

I have enjoyed the Writing Lab Newsletter very much and have found it very helpful. I agree with the editorial "Are Machines Helpful?" Our Writing Lab operates on a voluntary drop-in basis. We need help in handling large numbers of students without wasting their time when we are under-staffed due to being unable to predict when students will come and how many students will come at any given time.

Lillian T. Smith, Director
Learning Skills Center
Delta State University

Options is a quarterly publication of the University of Toronto on issues in teaching and learning in higher education. In Options 3 is an article, "Teaching Writing," by Roger Greenwald, an instructor at the Innis College Writing Laboratory, University of Toronto; in Options 4, Principal Dennis Duffy writes about his experiences in the Department of English. To receive copies of Options, write to:

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The Writing Workshop at Tulane University operates without specialized facilities, materials, or staff. Our lab was established by the English Department in 1976 as an immediate if somewhat makeshift, response to a growing need among Freshman English students for remedial instruction in grammar and writing skills. Each semester, out of approximately thirty teaching assistants, the English Department assigns three to four interested and experienced graduate instructors who earn their assistantships by tutoring six hours a week in the Workshop and teaching one section of Freshman English. In addition, one teaching assistant fulfills all assistantship requirements by tutoring and serving as Workshop director under the supervision of the director of teaching assistants. Appointees are well aware of the writing problems freshmen encounter and the skills they need to develop.

Students who come to the lab are usually referred by their instructors, but many come without referral. We give no grades, no extra credit, and offer no predesigned minicourses in grammar or writing skills. Our tutoring supplements the composition course and is geared to individual and immediate writing problems. As attendance is voluntary, students are motivated to attend the Workshop in order to improve their work in their English class. Because attendance is due to such practical motives, students are usually willing to learn the writing skills and grammar freshmen are notoriously resistant to assimilating in the conventional classroom.

The flexibility of the Workshop, which arose out of the original stopgap nature of the program, has become one of its greatest strengths and has enabled us to help not only freshman composition students, our original target group, but also students in introductory and advanced literature courses. In fact, we think of our lab as a service not only to students but also to instructors, as the Workshop makes available to students with writing problems the time, personal attention, and encouragement both failing and C students need for improvement, personal attention which is not usually possible for the instructor to provide. Attendance being voluntary—usually one half-hour meeting weekly—the responsibility for improvement lies mainly with the student. This relieves instructors of some of the burden of dealing with poor or inadequately prepared students; for if a student does not wish to attend the lab, he must share responsibility for continued poor grades.
Along with the friendly and supportive attitude of the Workshop staff, we have found that making the students responsible for their improvement has been much of the basis for our success. Another asset of our lab is the program's low cost. We require only one small office for our tutorials. In addition, because we deal directly with students' writing assignments, we do not need costly diagnostic tests or materials other than grammar workbook—Sheila Graham's Harbrace College Workbook—which we have the students buy as needed. Once the semester is underway we fill nearly all available tutoring hours each week. Some students attend regularly all semester, some become regulars later in the semester, and others need only three to five meetings. Not all students improve, and not all attend who should, but for those willing to become responsible for their improvement, progress is often dramatic.

Along with Susan Glassman of the South- eastern Massachusetts Writing Lab described in the November, 1978, issue, we have also found that student motivation which comes from a close coordination with the teaching aims of the English Department has much to do with the success of a writing lab, in our case a lab with no special facilities or funds.

Ellen Day, Mary Foster, Pat Naranjo
Newcomb Writing Workshop
Tulane University

Situation-based Topics

As diagnostic/evaluation instruments, our writing center uses matched writing samples, papers of 450-600 word length written as responses to any of a set of situation-based topics. Each situation is stated in a short paragraph which gives the students a background for their writing:

A Brinks armored truck is going down Clinton Street ahead of you. As you reach Washington Street, the traffic light turns red. When the Brinks truck brakes to a stop, the rear door flies open, and three bags of money tumble out. The driver of the truck does not see what has happened and starts to move his truck forward. People are beginning to gather. A man and a woman dash into the street, pick up a bag of money, and start to carry it off. What will you do? Warn the truck driver? Try to stop people from taking the money? Run quickly to get your share of the loot? In a paper of 450-600 words, explain what you would do and why you would do it.

Some of these situations require moral choice (payment of a bribe to get a business contract); some require life-style decisions (saving energy to earn a vacation); some require designing an effective course of action (getting a company to honor its warrantee). Each list contains four topics, at least one of which refers to a business situation, one to a social situation, and one to a personal problem.

In general, while situation-based writing has not led necessarily to better student writing in terms of grammar problems, it has made for more interesting papers, ones which are easier to read and easier to score. Additionally, few students have had problems reaching the required 450-600 word length. With more traditional topics, lack of length was a frequent problem as students quickly ran out of things to say.

Another problem alleviated by the situation-based assignments has been the use of trite, generalized language. Responses to the situations have been generally fact-based. While students may apply traditional morality to the Brinks situation detailed above, they tend to give specific details about their chosen course of action.

Since students are able to write about these situations at greater length, our staff is better able to see the way students handle general organizational matters as well as basic grammar. The staff can better direct their instruction by basing it on the specific occasions in which problems occur. For example, many students experience comma difficulties only with introductory material or only when using "and. Another student benefit, especially for those whose main problem is anxiety about writing, is that the long sample frequently shows that student problem areas are few in number. This allows the student to experience some relief about the number of difficulties that need work and
can be a real confidence-builder.

At the end of the course, a matched writing sample allows the student to see directly the amount of progress that has been made. Usually, this knowledge or progress and confidence in ability has decreased the trepidation with which students have gone on to their regular composition course.

Michael F. O'Hear
Indiana - Purdue at Fort Wayne

AN APPROACH TO CONFERENCING

All of us in writing labs know about the need to make an accurate and specific diagnosis of a student's writing problems, in order to design an achievable program for that student. I think we're beginning to learn as well about how we must first set up some bases and penetrate some barriers, in order to work effectively with a student. My own experience in the lab at Carnegie-Mellon has made me more and more aware of the need to go slowly, to allow the students and myself to find out something about who the other is, and then to move gradually into talking about their writing; of the need to establish a working relationship with each one, to build an atmosphere in which teacher and student can function with a unique kind of mutual respect and trust; and of the need to know about a student's past experiences in writing, in order to deal with the effects of those experiences.

Therefore my colleagues and I have been using a set of specific techniques, partly psychological and sociological, to help establish a foundation for working with an individual student's writing process. I have developed a preliminary questionnaire, which the student fills out when she makes her first appointment. When the student comes in for her first conference, we begin it with a few minutes discussion—roughly ten—of the subjects covered by these questions, using the answers on the questionnaire as the basis for further exploration. In these opening few minutes of the conference, we pursue these goals: (1) by our responses to the student, to help him perceive us as writing experts, ones who will accept him as a person and respect his ideas; (2) by our choice of questions, to help the student begin to develop an accurate perception of her ability as a writer and a positive attitude about what she can do; and (3) by our careful ordering of questions, to help the student relax and thereby enable her to discover informative answers.

The questions we ask students in this beginning part of a first conference are designed also to elicit specific information: (1) about the student's quantity and quality of writing experience; (2) about the student's attitude toward writing and her feelings about her ability as a writer; (3) about the student's habits in handling the writing process; and (4) about the student's relationship to the instructor and course through which she was referred.

We begin with factual, non-threatening, therefore easy-to-answer questions; the student's year and major, who referred him, and why. If the referral was made in connection with a course, we ask what writing has been done in the course, and what kind of feedback and grades the student has received. Next, we try to learn about the student's level as a writer, by asking whether the writing, feedback and grade level we're looking at are typical for the student. From here, we move into the question of where the student's self-image as a writer came from: we ask about his writing experiences in high school and college, both the amount and the kind.

Now we approach the problem at hand and begin to determine what to work on. If the student is self-referred, simply for "help with writing," he can often identify an area of difficulty himself; in fact, students show surprising levels of sophistication about their writing difficulties, and we certainly need to consider these statements. If the student came in connection with a course assignment, we may move into subtle questions about his relationship with the teacher and course. We need particularly to determine whether the student understands the assignment or, if he arrives with a paper he has been asked to revise, whether he understands and accepts the teacher's comments. Discussion of the comments may well lead into a revelation of bafflement or anger, in which case we have to ask about the cause of these feelings.

We focus at last on the student's handling of the writing process—e.g., what created the problem. We ask the student to describe
the process he has gone through in thinking about and/or writing this paper so far, and at the same time ask about his usual way of handling the process. We ask specific and detailed questions about prewriting, composing, and revising. The answers to these questions show clearly to what extent the student has a sense of writing as process. And not surprisingly, the answers usually reveal, as Janet Emig and others have found, that there is little formal planning and little revision; that students often begin the paper the night before it is due, write one draft, and then type it. I think these responses show why we save these questions for last. For one thing, they are threatening, because they force the student to reveal what he feels guilty or anxious about: guilt over last minute, hurried preparation; or worse yet, if the student worked long and hard and did badly, anxiety about failure. Second, discussion of process comes last because it leads directly and logically into talking about doing the assignment.

There can be no set routine in the approach to conferencing I’ve described. It involves being tuned in to the areas of great emotional import in writing and being ready to shift areas and pick up on whatever seems important and fruitful. Above all, it involves being aware of the range of factors that affect writing ability. Approaching the one-on-one conference by establishing a mutually trusting relationship and by asking for vital information before discussing a student’s assignment or paper can help us know better what to do for the immediate problem and for the long range. Furthermore, by this kind of approach we have already helped the student discover something about her ability to evaluate her writing. Taking a few planned and purposeful minutes to talk with students before working on their problems is well worth the time it takes, for them and for us.

If you would like a copy of the preliminary questionnaire we use at Carnegie-Mellon write to me at: Communication Skills Center, Carnegie-Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA 15213.

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