



# WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER



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As the end of the year draws nearer, we all wonder how effective our writing labs have been during the year. At a recent conference one director offered her estimate of her writing lab's success. "In the last week," she explained, "I've said good-bye to over a dozen students who used the lab all year and are feeling fairly self-sufficient by now. I also started working with six new students last week, writers who should have come in during the year but were finally driven in by last minute panic. But as long as the end-of-the-semester ratio of good-byes to hello's is 2:1, we must be more than a "quick fix" or band-aid station that labs are sometimes accused of being."

And how do you evaluate your writing lab? If you have similar informal measures of success, send them; along to share with the rest of us. And, of course, keep sending your articles, announcements, reviews, queries, names of new members, and yearly \$5 donations (in checks made payable to Purdue University but sent to me) to:

Muriel Harris, editor  
Writing Lab Newsletter Dept.  
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Purdue University  
West Lafayette, IN 47807 1984

## WRITING LAB DIRECTORY

The 1984 Writing Lab Directory is a compilation of two-page Questionnaires completed by writing lab directors. The questionnaire answers describe each lab's instructional staff, student population, types of instruction and materials, special programs, use of computers, and facilities. Copies are obtainable for \$13.50 each, including postage. Prepaid orders only. Please make all checks payable to Purdue University and send them to Muriel Harris, Department of English, Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana 47907.

## THE WRITING LAB AND FRESHMAN COMPOSITION: A MUTUAL RE-DEFINITION

When a student comes to the writing lab for help, I have often found that my most difficult problem is discovering the objectives of the composition instructor's assignment. For a variety of reasons--which may be the fault of the instructor or both--the nature of the issue is not at all clear. I don't know where to begin.

Occasionally, the instructor will supply a written copy of the assignment and its objectives. In such cases, it is possible to begin helping the student define the nature and demands of his writing task and get started. Even if I do not approve of the assignment, clear communication of its guidelines greatly improves my success with the student writer. And if the assignment is well-conceived, I can immediately help the student to generate ideas and then develop a strategy for achieving the desired rhetorical goal. Unfortunately, though, what usually happens is that no written copy of the assignment accompanies the student to the lab, so I must meet with the instructor to determine how best to help the student. Having heard the student's garbled account of what he is supposed to be doing, I need the instructor to give me (1) insight into the student's past writing performance, (2) a clear explanation of the assignment and its goals, and (3) the grading emphases or priorities which the instructor will apply. I can often get a reasonably helpful response to the first (usually a list of several standard weaknesses of freshman writing). However, when discussing the second, I am constantly amazed by the disparity between the student's version of the assignment and the instructor's. This is not always due to the

student's confusion. Having discussed many assignments with many instructors, I have sometimes found myself as confused as the students. Responses to my third concern the instructor's priorities in grading-are sometimes more lucid, but I often find them contradicted in practice when the student returns to the lab to rewrite the paper. It is difficult to set revising or editing priorities when instructors' comments are tell how or vague. It is also hard to tell how much change in the paper's content is required or whether or not the student should simply start over. It seems to me that instructors too often mistakenly encourage students to "revise" an unsalvageable paper, rather than begin a new one, and this makes the lab instructor's task even more difficult. See Nancy Sorters' "Responding to Student Writing," CCC, 33 (a y 1982), 148-56, for an insightful discussion of this probl etnj Since the lab instructor is usually charged With. "getting the student through" another instructor's writing course, it is absolutely essential for instructor's comments on papers to establish clear priorities for revising them.

This litany of difficulties is probably--atleast in part-familiar to anyone who has taught extensively in a lab situation. And I believe that it is symptomatic of serious problem faced by writing labs today, namely, their lack of integration with the rest of the writing curriculum, Because of their isolation, lab instructors--who often have more expertise i n the teaching of writing than their English department colleagues-are usually only in a position to provide a short term "band-aid" solution to the student's writing problems.

For instance, the fact that the lab is usually not a required part of the composition program militates against successful writing instruction by both the lab teacher and the teacher of the composition class. The lab instructor cannot communicate his expertise to his colleague because he is inhibited by an unfamiliar assignment and perhaps frustrated by its inappropriateness or poor conception. The English faculty member, on the other hand, neither has the time nor the inclination to reconsider the assignment or clarify it for the student who is having problems. Teaching four sections of freshman composition often leaves little time for reflecting on or improving one's teaching methods. So, by leaving it up to the lab teacher to help the student, the instructor really divorces himself from teaching that student. Alienation occurs at

a time when close communication is most needed, and none of the parties involved can learn from one another. These dynamics perpetuate the distrust and even hostility which often exist between lab staff and their English department colleagues.

I believe that these problems can only be solved by completely re-thinking our writing programs as a whole. Any such effort should have the following goals:

1. To involve lab teachers and composition instructors in a constructive dialogue which will yeild agreement on what the Specific objectives of the writing program are
2. To standardize the methodology of the composition courses, that all instructors teach all stages of the composing process, from prewriting to editing
3. To involve all composition faculty members as lab instructors
4. To standardize the content and objectives of the assignments in the composition classes so that students will be word ng on assignments which are familiar to all instructors and lab teachers (this should not jeopardize the students' creative response to these assignments)
5. To make the writing lab component a required part of each composition course
6. To use the lab component to help the student at a specific stage of the composing process, i.e., prewriting, writing, revising, editing
7. To reconstruct the composition courses so that lab activities will replace some regular class meetings. This will prevent overloading the instructors.

I realize that none of these goals is easy to reach, particularly in larger, more diversified departments. Nevertheless, in these times of budget stress and faculty overload, writing labs must become more effective, not only in improving students' writing skills, but in applying lab expertise to the teaching of larger numbers of students. During the last two years, increased demands on the English faculty at North Carolina Wesleyan College have forced me and my colleagues to examine the effectiveness of our writing lab. We discovered several major problems which prevented our composition program from gaining much advantage from the lab's operation. By defining

these goals for our program, we believe we have found a way to solve these problems and to vastly improve our entire program.

In addition to the communication problems I cited earlier, our lab has not been well-attended. Confusion over whether or not lab should be required kept both instructors and students from taking advantage of its services. Scheduling was often difficult because we did not have the staff needed to keep the lab open all day and during evening hours. Furthermore, it has been difficult to use student tutors because we have had too little time to train and supervise them properly. And, finally, instructors frequently waited too long to refer their weaker writers for help, often because they did not realize the seriousness of the students' problems until later in the semester.

All of us were dissatisfied with the lab's contribution to our writing program, but we did not get a chance to make significant changes until the college received a Title III grant in 1982. This grant has given us the opportunity to make some fairly radical structural changes, not just in the lab, but throughout our entire composition curriculum.

The major structural change we will make in our program will be to make the lab a required part of English 111 and 112, our freshman composition courses. More specifically, we have determined what part we want the lab to play in the teaching of the writing process itself. In the remainder of this paper, I want to explain why we think our proposal can make our lab more efficient, how this reorganization can improve our composition program as a whole, and how we propose to make the new program work.

Until we analyzed our entire composition program, my colleagues and I had tacitly assayed the lab's inadequacies to be the result of conflicts inherent in the writing lab/English department relationship. However, we finally decided that the lab's problems actually reflected the general pedagogical disarray of the English composition program as a whole. By sharing both my frustrations and my insights with my colleagues as lab director, I was able to give them a new perspective on the writing problems of their students and on some of the problems they were having in teaching them. Their frustrations as teachers of weak writers convinced me that my role as lab direc

tor put me in a unique position to suggest ways to improve our program so that all of you could improve our course teachings. The students, of course, will benefit most of all.

After months of discussion, we reached the conclusion that the assignments, methods, and goals of our composition courses were so disparate and contradictory that the lab could not possibly solve our students' practical writing problems. More involvement from the entire composition faculty was essential to clarify these goals. We began to see the need to make our composition courses more coherent in terms of teaching strategies and expectations. By thinking about what the lab could do for our students (and for us as teachers), we found ourselves able to restructure, clarify and improve the objectives of our freshman sequence. Therefore, we have come to believe that affirming the lab's importance in our efforts to improve our teaching has led us to a workable plan for a healthier program. Having acknowledged that the lab experience would be most useful as a coherent part of each composition course, we had to decide how lab instruction could further the specific goals of each course. Since all of us had agreed to teach each writing assignment in stages (prewriting, writing, rewriting and editing), we wanted to focus the lab activities on one of these stages.

We decided to make the lab largely responsible for handling the prewriting (heuristic) activities, which lead to the first draft of each assignment. All of us agreed that we were most frustrated by our students' inability to 'find a topic.' We also agreed that this problem could best be solved by an interview between instructor and student, especially since this is what we usually wound up doing anyway when our students needed such help. Since the students will have a lab interview to help prepare a first draft, the writing class can focus its activities more productively, using peer evaluations and group reading exercises, to revise working drafts. This approach will allow us to get a more productive response from our students because they will all have gone through a supportive lab session which will have helped them define a workable topic. We expect the students to be more confident and less confused about the appropriateness of their responses to the assignment. They should also be better able to benefit from the comments of their peers and their instructors than they have been in the past.

We believe that, as we refine the program, our students' performance will benefit from a clearer understanding of the stages of the writing process. The lab interview should better orient the students to each writing task and give them the support they need to complete it. They will also help students make the transition from the private world of their own thoughts to the public world of discourse by capitalizing on the important intermediate step of dialogue. The movement from lab interview to classroom should reinforce an awareness of the writing class as audience, for which any writing must be prepared through a process of self-discovery and continued refinement to achieve a rhetorical goal. In short, by focusing our use of the lab in this way, we hope to help our students mature as writers by giving them a practical understanding of the writing process.

Having described our proposal and its goals, I now want to explain how we have decided to implement it. As you have undoubtedly imagined, scheduling and staffing a writing lab session for each of the approximately 120 students in our composition courses was no easy task, especially when each of the seven writing assignments requires a lab conference. Those of you from larger departments can probably envision greater problems here. Part of our problem was solved by having all composition instructors commit one hour of class time (per section of composition) and one office hour per week to lab instruction. Since the lab interview replaces one class meeting per week, instructors would not have their teaching load significantly increased. As the lab's director, I will work twelve hours per week and, if possible, other composition instructors may be able to teach in the lab on an overload or adjunct basis. We have also developed a three-hour, upper-division credit course entitled "Teaching Basic Writing," which will give us the proper format in which to train competent students as peer tutors. With all of us contributing in these various ways, the lab will be open virtually all day long and several evenings per week. Students should have no trouble scheduling their appointments.

The grant funds have made it possible for three members of our department to get re-lease time to rewrite the syllabus for our composition courses. They are producing a course handbook which will replace the standard rhetoric and contain the entire sequence of writing assignments for both courses. Since this handbook will be our

major text, all of us who work in the lab will be able to help any student--whether he is in our class or someone else's--to develop a working draft. This will help solve the lab teacher's perennial problem of deciphering a colleague's assignment, but, more important, the collaboration on the handbook itself supplies an excellent (and much--needed) opportunity to improve our strategies and clarify our goals as writing teachers.

Attendance at lab sessions will be a mandatory part of each composition assignment. Students need not attend a session per week, but each writing assignment requires at least one lab interview prior to the first class meeting in which first drafts are discussed. When students come to the lab, they are assigned to bring a first writing with them. This need not be a fully developed first draft, but it should be a good start toward one. If the student has not been able to produce a first draft, the lab instructor will help him do so. The completed first draft must be approved by a lab instructor before the student takes it to class for further revision.

The lab instructors will typically concern themselves with the following matters when responding to student writing at this stage:

1. Has the writer understood the nature of the writing task imposed by the assignment? If not, the interview begins with a clarification.

2. Has the writer begun to develop a substantive and insightful response to the assignment? If not, the interview should present heuristic procedures which will yield such a response.

3. Has the writer developed a sufficient sense of purpose for this writing? Has a point of view been defined? If not, the lab teacher helps the student commit his feelings to paper.

Assignments are uniformly scheduled so that students have at least one week after the assignment is given in which to produce their first drafts and bring them to the lab. Therefore, additional lab meetings can be scheduled if necessary until the student has completed a responsible first draft.

Typically, students will work on rewriting and editing each assignment in their class meetings; however, they will be en-

## COMPUTERS AS TOOLS FOR WRITING AT LOAD HIGH SCHOOL

couraged to come to the lab for help at any stage of their assignment. Furthermore, the lab staff will be able to help students at all stages of writing their papers during those periods when the classes have moved beyond the first draft. To ensure our effectiveness as lab teachers at all stages of the assignments, we have agreed to attend a series of workshops which will be specifically concerned with marking student papers. This will help us overcome the problems of misunderstanding or misinterpreting the priorities an instructor establishes for the student's revision activities. Student tutors will also participate in these workshops. Obviously, our improvement as commentators on students' papers will also help our students to improve their writing.

This proposal could be adapted to fit the needs of any composition program. Different institutions and faculties may, of course, have different priorities. The lab inter-views could focus on other later stages of the writing process. Other ways of involving composition faculty in lab instruction can also be found. However, the endeavor to clarify the function of the writing lab in accordance with the goals we have developed could greatly improve the effectiveness of all of our writing programs and increase the morale of our instructors. As writing lab specialists, we have a professional responsibility to become leaders in redefining composition programs so that they reach their objectives. The process of doing so may be long and difficult, but sharing our ideas with our colleagues and developing a common sense of purpose can only yield the best results-for us and for our students.

Michael McCully  
Bloomsburg University



### CALL FOR PAPERS

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For further information: Dr. Kwaku Armah N.J.  
Dept. of Higher Ed.  
One Quakerbridge Plaza ON 540  
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The Logan High School English Department is trying something new, a "Writing Room." Writing as a process rather than simply an end product is the philosophy that underlies this new concept. Sixteen IBM/PCs, tables and chairs grouped for small conferences, and letter-quality printers ready to click-out papers combine to help all juniors and seniors move through the writing process. A software program designed at UCLA called WANDAH, Writer's Aid and Author's Helper, provides three programs for the student writer: prewriting aids to help students get started, a wonderfully simple word-processor which promotes textual changes, and a review and revision section which shows students some stylistic and organizational tendencies in their writing.

At this high school, semester English classes, composed of juniors and seniors, are designed as thematic units. For example, in the Western Literature class, speeches, compositions, and reading materials center around the literature of the American West. Although teachers have always required students to write in these classes, most of the writing has been product oriented. With the advent of 'The Writing Room,' all juniors and seniors spend one fourth of their English time working in the computer lab. For the work done in 'The Writing Room,' specific thinking-writing assignments are developed. A prompt (an assignment) asking students to compare and/or contrast an object in nature and a man-made object is given. A typical assignment requires that pre-writing activities occur in the classroom before students move to the lab, and then the writers use the pre-writing aids on WANDAH to generate some additional ideas on their subjects and to think about organization.

The first draft of their papers is prepared either via computer or pencil and paper and then put on the floppy disk. Each student gets a printed draft copy and moves into pre-assigned groups for peer-reviewing. Since each paper looks professional, students approach this part of the process with very little apprehension about how their papers look. An evaluation scale for each assignment reveals the criteria for judging the quality of the paper and sets clear expectations for the peer-reviewer, writer, and the teacher.

After a paper has been reviewed and revised, the author has WANDAH look at it for stylistic features or organizational trends. One program highlights "to be" verbs in a text and suggests to the student that an overuse of "being verbs weakens a paper. Another aid highlights pronouns, and the teacher follows with a class or small group discussion on clear antecedents or correct pronoun case. WANDAH has twelve of these composition aids students can use to help them analyze their own papers. Classroom instruction on how to use the information WANDAH gives them is necessary, and this information makes excellent material for teaching composition techniques.

For example, for one assignment an emphasis on sentence variety is incorporated in the writing unit. The students are asked to bring a WANDAH sentence-length graph to class. This graph is simply a picture of the length of each sentence and shows all sentences of each paragraph so students can see immediately all they have a tendency to construct all sentences the same. I part of one student's graph looked like this:

----+---10----+---20

Paragraph 1  
11111111  
11111111  
11111111  
111111  
11111  
111111  
1111

This particular student had all short sentences with subject/verb structure. She was shown some techniques for writing longer sentences of varied patterns, and the revision of her original sentences graphed out like this.

----+---10----+---20----+

Paragraph 1  
111111111111111  
11111111111111111111111111111111  
111  
11111111  
111111111111111111111111

With their own writing as material for drill work on sentence length variation, sentence combining and decombing exercises become more meaningful for the student.

After peer-revision and group work on

diagnosed errors, students return to the computers and make the final revisions. Sometimes this is a matter of changing only a few words, but often a student will move entire paragraphs from one place to another or add details throughout the paper. The revision that occurs demonstrates that student writers are spending more time revising papers than they did before they worked in " The Writing Room. " I'm certain the emphasis on writing as a process has prompted the students to think about their writing more than a product-oriented program did, but the computer makes a revision easy. Students willingly incorporate suggestions and cogitate changes since they do not have to laboriously retype or handwrite a final copy.

Side effects from WANDAH and The Writing Room" exist. Student and teacher attitude toward writing has taken on a new aura, Students have a sense of accomplishment when they hand in a neatly typed paper, and teachers can spend less time evaluating when they don't have to decipher penmanship.

Studies are in progress to determine just what effect this entire program has on improving student writing. Now, no concrete evidence exists to demonstrate actual improvement, but one student expressed what instructors are seeing when he said, "With WANDAH, writing is easier and more fun." The entire thinking/writing concept, with the addition of the computer as a convenient tool, has made composing come alive at Logan High School.

Pat Stoddart  
Logan High  
School Logan,  
Utah



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# TUTOR'S CORNER

## GIVING SILLINESS A CHANCE

Writing an essay is like preparing an omelet. With an essay, one needs the right ingredients in order to come up with a good piece--proper grammar, punctuation, development, style, etc. The omelet also requires several ingredients--milk, eggs, cheese, ham, vegetables, etc.

There is one other thing needed for cooking an omelet--a flame to place the frying pan on. Without the flame, there is little but a slop of objects uselessly floating around. In writing, imagination is the flame that cooks the essay. Without a spark of imagination, writing becomes as appetizing as an uncooked omelet.

As I assign essay topics for my tutees, I stay away from "serious" topics, such as drunk driving or abortion. I don't want my tutees to be burdened with serious stuff, but rather allow their minds to fly in fantasy. I employ a slightly silly brand of fantasy that lets their creativity run free while clearing up problems with adequate development.

My favorite essay subjects concern zoology. As none of the tutees are zoology majors, their knowledge of the animal world is a bit limited. Therefore, I place them in an imaginary situation. They are now writers for National Geographic, and their editor told them to do a story on an animal called the "ou." Their expression is one of immense confusion; they never heard of the ou. This is where the fun starts.

I am aware that few people know about the ou. I tell them to create the ou in their minds. This is the cliched key that unlocks the door to their imagination. They must create the animal and tell me everything I ever wanted to know about the ou: what it is, what it looks like, where it lives, what it eats, how it mates, how many children it raises, if it's endangered, if it's a predator or victim, how it received its name, etc. The tutees paint a verbal picture, going into detail about everything that involves the ou. These essays are highly developed and sophisticated, and the clarity of the writing is amazing. I have found that most tutees feel more relaxed when

developing their National Geographic piece. The imagination is the flame, and all they've learned is beautifully exploited.

Besides the ou, they have tackled the dik-dik, okapi, hawksbill, tapir, tarsier, and aye-aye, among others. All these creatures are real, and everyone demands (not asks, demands) to know just what the real animal is (the ou is a yellow and black Hawaiian bird).

Another piece of silliness comes with the Republic of Banana, where governments are in constant change (this week's government . . .). The tutees are told that they are generals in Banana, and they stage a successful coup against the current tyrants. As the new rulers of Banana, what changes in policy would they implement? Since Banana is a product of the mind, the tutees place this product in their minds, imagine conditions before the coup and the reforms that will be instituted. Here again, the problems of development disappear, and the writing is not the least bit cloudy. Generalization gives way to specifics (as Jack Webb used to say, "just the facts.").

More silliness comes with the hospital essay. The tutee is told that a skiing mishap has sent him to the hospital. The question I want answered is why he should get better and leave the hospital. The idea is bizarre, and a puzzled look usually meets the topic. But this gives rise to thought and the development of ideas. Why should I want to leave the hospital? Because .... and there goes the essay.

The old three wishes essay is not a novelty, but I spice it up by personifying the genie of the bottle who grants the wishes. With the guys, it's Felicia the Genie, while the girls meet Fred the Genie. This sparks a giggle or two, which makes the tutee more relaxed (Felicia was coined by a tutee who thought the genie needed a name).

For tutees who are improving because of this method, there are two essay subjects a bit harder but equally silly. The first one transforms the tutee into a mouse, and the essay must examine three aspects of his life

as a mouse. Again, specific thought is employed to handle this strange subject.

The second one concerns the tutee's pet, an elephant named Bubbles. It's easy to write about a pet dog or cat, but an elephant? This requires a good deal of thought since how does one spend time with a pet elephant. I ask the tutee why Bubbles is the world's best pet, and they take it from there,

Silliness will iron out development problems in troubled essayists, and once the cure is effective, serious essays can be attempted. Silliness doesn't work with everyone, particularly with very silly people. It's no fun watching a tutee turn into Baby Huey.

But give silliness a chance, and see if the essays show signs of improved development, clarity, and imagination.

Phil Hall  
Peer Tutor  
Pace University



#### VISUAL PERCEPTION THROUGH 'WINDOW PROOFREADING'

Often the grammatical and spelling errors that tutors find on student papers are not language competency errors. Many of them, in fact, are transcription errors. The complexities of composing and transcribing at the same time can prevent student writers from producing accurate transcriptions of their intentions. Instead, they write only the first few letters of a word, misspell common words, drop articles, write a word twice, omit suffixes, and so on. Students find it difficult to spot these errors during proofreading for several reasons. First, viewing their writing as extensions of self, they are psychologically unprepared to find faults in their papers. Because they do not expect errors, they usually do not find them. Second, when tutors instruct them to proofread, most students merely re-read. That is, they focus on the meaning of their communication rather than on the details of the physical text. Finally, because of habitual reading patterns, students' eyes move from fixation to fixation so rapidly that readers do not perceive all of key feature or shape, assume correctness, and quickly move on to the next perceptual unit.

Shelly Samuels, in her recent article on oral proofreading in the Writing Lab News letter, addressed student proofreading problems. Her tutors listened and watched while students read their papers aloud and pointed to each word with a pencil, Samuels found that oral proofreading helped to reduce surface errors in two student groups: those who spot errors on the page, orally correct them, and write corrections, and those who orally correct errors but do not see the errors on the page. I would like to introduce a supplemental technique to oral proofreading, one that again addresses the problems of these two groups of students.

"Window proofreading" is a method that Writing Center students have used successfully at Middle Tennessee State University for the past three years. I cut a small 1/4" high x 1/2" wide rectangular window out of the center of a 3" x 5" piece of black matte board and then train the tutors in the use of the window. Tutors, in turn, spend one session training students to proofread with the window. Tutors ask students to place the window opening over each word and mark of punctuation in sequence. They instruct students to look at each word slowly and to think about the spelling. Students also look at each mark of punctuation to verify that they have used the punctuation correctly. When they reach the end of their essay, tutors instruct them to proofread again, but this time they read a backward sequence from the end of the essay to the beginning of it. The use of the window retrains students to focus on the letters that form a word rather than on meaning. By isolating the word from the rest of the sentence, students reduce the interference from adjacent words. After the students perceive a word, tutors encourage them to lift the window and to look at the word within the context of the entire sentence to verify that they have used the correct word. Tutors emphasize visual perception first and understanding of meaning second. In general, if students initially proofread by sentence or idea, their focus on meaning prevents them from perceiving mechanical errors even during subsequent proofreading.

To judge the success of this proofreading technique, I tested twenty freshman composition students working in the Writing Center. Students proofread two student essays planted with the same number and types of errors. When the students used the window to proofread an essay, they found an average of four more errors than on the paper they proofread without the window.



When I asked those same students to proof-read two of their own essays, on one paper they found between four and seven of their errors when they used the window, but in proofreading their other paper without the window they usually found none of their errors. The types of errors that students most easily spotted with "window proof-reading" included fragments, comma splices, faulty verb forms, incorrect punctuation, and misspellings.

Window proofreading offers several advantages. First, after the initial training session, students can proofread independently with considerable success, thus freeing Writing Center tutors to work with other students on higher level skills. Second, window proofreading is a technique that students can use in the classroom during examinations when vocalization is inappropriate. While no single technique is effective for all students, window proof-reading does aid those students who have difficulty spotting their transcription errors.



Elaine Ware Middle  
Tennessee State  
University

<sup>1</sup>Shelly Samuels, "Emphasizing Oral Proofreading in the Writing Lab: A

Multifunction Technique for both Tutors and Students," WIN, 9 (October, 1984), pp. 1-4.



GALLADET  
COLLEGE'S NEW  
WRITING CENTER

We're pleased to announce that Gallaudet College (a liberal arts college for the severely hearing impaired) opened a Writing Center in August, 1984. I say "opened" in spite of our failure as yet to send a general announcement to students. Our announcements to faculty members have brought us so much business that we are admittedly dragging our feet in inviting more students than have already found us.

Our first aim was to assist the students of eight teachers who had gone through a four-week summer workshop on Writing Across the Curriculum. When we thought we were able to deal with those students, we sent a

general announcement to the faculty. We're still reeling now--months after the tidal wave broke.

We've begun modestly, two persons operating in a 600 square-foot room equipped with cast-off furniture and well-thumbed textbooks. But the room is very pleasant, the furniture is serviceable, and there are compensations for the shabby books. We have carrels for writing, conference tables at which we've been doing tutorials, several good electric typewriters, and two IBM computers for word processing and other process-oriented writing assistance. The second-hand furniture reflects our impatience to get started; the computers and other new equipment reveal the college's strong commitment to the center.

Our aim is to assist students with writing they are doing in courses other than English. Because there is a basic-skills tutorial service already in place in our English department, we are focussed on composition-level writing problems, and our tutors will be writing teachers rather than peers or graduate students. You can see the difficulty we'll have with this distinction. Deaf students have extremely durable reading and writing problems, and it's likely that many of our clients will also be working with graduate student tutors on sentence-level problems. The promise of more space in the near future leads us to plan for the placing of both services in the same area so coordination is easier.

We are open from 9:30 a. m. to 5:00 p.m. for tutorial and other help. Our intake interviewer and I handle tutorials during those hours, and then from 5:00 until 9:00 in the evening the center is kept open by graduate students. We are busy at all hours, word processing having the edge over tutorial in popularity.

Starting a new service like this is exciting and it's fun. It's also, as you know, exhausting. We began with a close reading of Tutoring Writing: A Sourcebook for Writing Labs (Ed. Muriel Harris, Glenview, Ill : Scott, Foresman, and Co., 1982) and a few other of the growing list of writings about writing centers. We won't be comfortable until we have built a whole library of guides, models, sample assignments, and reference tools. But we've started.



Robert E. McDonald  
Gallaudet College

THE PEER TUTOR AS PRINCIPAL BENEFACTOR IN  
THE WRITING CENTER  
or  
ITS NOT JUST FOR ENGLISH TEACHING ANY MORE

No writing center can perform success-fully with a poorly trained or unprepared staff. In a very literal sense, the effectiveness of the writing center depends on the quality of its tutors. As a result we require many kinds of skills, competencies, and attitudes from our tutors, as Joyce Steward and Mary Croft point out in The Writing Laboratory: Organization, Management, and Methods (1982). They list six philosophical commitments t h a t are fundamental for any lab teacher. Although they are quite accurate, their statements are deceptively simple. For example, anyone posits the undeniable basic premise that llab staff members should be committed to teaching writing as a process; others of the six statements are just as indispensable and primary, but the implications that follow from them are, nevertheless, quite momentous. Inherent in these commitments is the underlying assumption that the writing tutor can function as diagnostician, teacher, facilitator, evaluator, audience-handling such diverse concerns as analyzing student writing, discovering the most effective means of dealing with each student, con-fronting student writing anxiety, evaluating stages of the writing process, knowing when to intervene and when to let a student struggle, and deciding whether a face-toe face conference or a small group discussion would be more effective in a given situation. These are rather sophisticated skills, yet writing centers across the nation are training staff members, many of whom are undergraduate peer tutors, to fulfill these roles.

To date, most research and scholarship on the peer tutor has centered on the vital issues of training and evaluating; Muriel Harris's Tutoring Writing (1982), for example, Offers valuable suggestions for both, and its essays reinforce, time and again, the need for flexibility and competence in the lab staff. Yet there is another issue, more rarely examined, which has far-reaching implications, not only for the peer tutor, but also for the writing center's relationship to the university as a whole: In addition to all of its other services, the writing center offers its trained staff professional skills that can be advantageous in careers ranging from the

traditionally-related one of teaching to the more unfamiliar ones of business and other professions. If we, as English faculty members and/or writing center administrators, fail to capitalize on these side effects of the writing center's performance, vimnot only commit a devalue disservice to our tutors, but we alsothe writing center's role as a learning center for the university's total program. While improving our clients' writing skills and attitudes must remain our primary objective-- for it is our reason for being--we can provide services that have unexpected applications in a variety of disciplines and can benefit our tutors regardless of their majors or chosen careers. We offer a unique framework for training competent professionals with very marketable skills, capable of fulfilling the growing leadership needs of our increasingly complex society. It is time we made the university, the employment community, and potential staff members aware of this.

Traditionally, most peer tutors have been either English or English education majors, planning to move from college to graduate school or to teaching. Writing center staff experience can be helpful in both cases, First of all, tutors who intend to pursue graduate degrees have an advantage when applying for assistantships, for they already have firsthand practical experience in conveying content and developing skills in other students. In a recent interview, a former peer tutor from our program credited her tutoring experience with easing her adjustment to her current role as graduate teaching assistant, Some of her colleagues, without comparable experience or training, have expressed difficulty in conducting one-on-one conferencing with students, They have been, to an extent, overwhelmed by the new demands of evaluator, authority figure, and diagnostician placed on them. Our former tutor, however, could enter her new responsibilities with self-confidence about her relationship to freshman students, for she had had the chance to learn how to work with them in the non-punitive atmosphere of the tutorial.

Those tutors who plan to enter the teaching profession as soon as they receive their undergraduate degrees also gain practical experience in adjusting to the fine learning styles and limitations of a variety of students. Because in the tutorial they must deal on a face-to-face basis with their

students' confusion and lack of comprehension, without the blunting effect a class-room full of too many students can provide, the lessons they learn about teaching from tutoring are more vivid and immediate than classroom practice teaching alone can ever be. Peer tutors become adept at innovative approaches to editing or composing or spelling because they receive immediate feedback from their clients demonstrating just how effective their explanations have been. This is valuable training for any potential teacher.

In addition, both graduate students and teachers can gain in another way from their association with the writing center. If they have participated in a well-structured training program, they have been introduced, directly or indirectly, to current theories for teaching composition. They are, thus, ideologically prepared to value the process approach to writing. Stephen North, who has long been an advocate of tutor training programs, encourages this process by giving his tutors lists of kinds of tutorials, such as invention/discovery, revising, or editing, which are based on both the student's "location" in the writing process and her intention for the piece of writing ("Training Tutors to talk About Writing," CCC December 198U). Essentially, then, the writing center becomes a laboratory from the tutors' perspectives, for it provides them with the opportunity to put theory to practice, to see the actual uses of heuristics or of revision techniques or the real applications of audience awareness. School administrators, as potential employers, should be made aware of this experience, for it can dramatically influence classroom effectiveness in new teachers.

We, as faculty members and part of the university, usually acknowledge the tutor's exposure to instructional-based skills which lend themselves easily and logically to the graduate school or the teaching profession, but we sometimes fail to notice the potential extensions of these skills to the business or professional world. One of our writing center's former tutors is now a personnel director for a national carpet company. Her duties require her to work with a spectrum of situations from informal interviews with disgruntled employees to presentations before colleagues or supervisors to, occasionally, formal legal and contractual representations of company policy. She finds two elements of her tutorial experiences of value in her current

position: 1) In the writing center she developed "contact skills" which enabled her to work comfortably with people of different backgrounds and levels of competence. This allowed her to overcome any fear or inhibition when working with people, regardless of their degree of literacy, and to help them understand the communication process. 2) She also developed the ability to be flexible or to "think on her feet," which she finds extremely useful for the variety of problems she must solve each day.

In effect, our former tutor has defined her experiences in the writing center in terms of learning how to achieve goals (helping students understand) and solving problems ("thinking on her feet"). In fact, her conception is not unique, for Steward and Croft describe the writing lab in very similar terms: The lab is a center for individual and small group instruction where students come, either voluntarily or on referral, to discuss and learn how best to meet requirements--those they set, those set for them--with any kind of writing they must do or wish to do" (p. 7), Their description of the writing lab distinguishes it as a "task group," rather than a "casual group," a classification John W. Keltner extends in Interpersonal Speech-communication: Elements and Structures(1970): "The particular goal and objective of the task group usually involves some anticipated action. The casual group has no such specific task but may have a more generalized goal that does not reach specifically beyond the meeting itself" (p. 292). Clearly the goal of the tutorial extends beyond the meeting and involves the tutor in attempting a permanent change in the client's attitude or behavior toward writing.

Substituting the vocabulary of one discipline for another's in this statement provides us with a basic tenet of business management, as quoted in Robert Tannenbaum, et al. , Leadership and Organization (1961) : "leadership always involves attempts on the part of a leader (influencer) to affect (influence) the behavior of a follower (influencee) or followers in a situation" (p. 24), Writing center experience, then, provides leadership training, for the tutorial situation is almost a paradigm of this definition. In fact, Thomas Scheidel and Laura Crowell (Discussing and Deciding, 1979), in breaking the leadership model into two interlocking parts called "inner work" and "outer work," describe in some detail a process that approximates the functioning of

the tutor as diagnostician, facilitator, teacher:

The leader observes and analyzes silently the ongoing work of the group on its task... These inner assessments, which are constantly altered by new observations, are the basis for the leader's overt actions--what is said and what is done; from the inner work springs the outer work. We Cannot, however, think of inner and outer work as being done in turn, first one and then the other; both are done all the time the [encounter] lasts. (p. 90)

Frequently at some part of this process the tutor must develop yet another role--interviewer--in order to elicit from students information about writing problems, needs, or expectations. Steward and Croft perceive this as a primary step of the lab process and include samples of it in their description of lab methods. As central as it is to effective tutoring, interviewing is not a simple skill to perfect. Keltner, in his speech--communication text, lists fourteen separate functions the interviewer must be able to handle, from controlling the focus of the interview and creating an atmosphere conducive to communication, to listening care-fully and adjusting frequently to feedback (pp. 276-80). Writing center experience allows the tutor to practice these skills regularly and to use them with growing ease and confidence. Indeed, the amount of experience the tutor has with these skills is usually not available to the undergraduate in any other college settings, including inter-viewing classes which can allow only a limited number of interview chances for each student.

Clearly tutorial training and experience develop communication and leadership skills that corporate employers as well as school administrators value. All of use--as administrators, faculty, and writing center staff members--should be aware of the competitive edge our tutors have earned in their ;work for us, and they should be shown how to market it for their career plans. We must encourage our tutors as well as ourselves to develop new and non-traditional perspectives in evaluating the advantages of tutoring, for it is valuable in today's job market.

Does this mean that we, as writing center

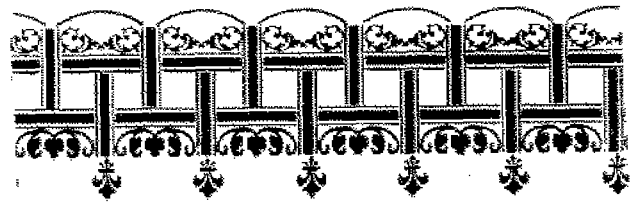
administrators, should change our recruitment policies in order to offer important managerial training to students who otherwise would be uninterested in tutoring or whose writing skills are borderline? Obviously, no; with vigor, no. Our first responsibility is always to the writing center's client--the student who needs or wants help in mastering part or all of the writing process. Criteria for staff selection must focus on finding as tutors those students who are themselves successful writers and who have the person-ality, temperament, and desire to work with others. To accept anyone less qualified to be a tutor would be a dereliction of our responsibility.

However, we can increase the already substantial benefits writing center experience and training bring to qualified tutors; by learning to analyze in t e n s o f their perspective careers or future plans the skills and expertise they develop by tutoring, we can significantly aid our tutors. In short, as writing center administrators we need to do what we teach our composition students to do: adapt to the specific audience the situation identifies for us. By using the appropriate vocabulary or technical jargon, for example, we can enumerate our tutors' marketable skills in letters of recommendation to potential employers or in annual reports to the university administration--in the terms most useful and suitable to the situation. Thus, a corporate employer who really wouldn't care about a prospective employee's knowledge of current composition theories might be very impressed with her interviewing experience, while the university superstructure, which might not be concerned with specifics, might be interested in the percentage of former tutors employed and the variety of careers they represent. The tutoring experience remains the same, but the way we describe it must be determined by audience and purpose.

From the beginning of peer tutoring, we have all recognized that it can produce immense personal satisfaction and growth for tutors, and we have drawn on the obvious applications of tutoring experience for prospective teachers. We need, however, to move beyond traditional applications into the previously unfamiliar territory of a high-tech world. Our tutors do develop skills in the writing center that transfer readily into the new environment and prepare them to step into a wide variety of careers of status and authority. It is time that

advertised that fact.

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A READER COMMENTS , , ,

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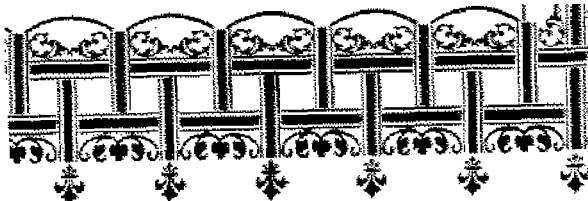
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I am former department chair of the Language Arts department at Burlington Community High School. I have been spearheading a group of department members who are interested in establishing a 'Communication Resource Center as an integral part of the entire high school curriculum. The center will have three functions: (1) to provide remediation,, reinforcement, and enrichment it traditional language arts skills for students on a drop-In/referral basis, (2) to utilize the Communication Resource Center' personnel in the content area classroom to introduce, reinforce, and enrich the use of traditional language arts skills (essay writing, research process, etc.) in content classes, and (3) to use the center and its personnel as the basis for incorporating "writing-as-learning" strategies and techniques into our entire curriculum, I have been a participant and instructor in both the " Southeast Iowa Writing Project" and the "Iowa Writing Project: Writing Across the Curriculum" summer institutes.

We have spent two years in studying and investigating the proposed "Communication Resource Center." and we hope to officially open the center in the fall of 1986. We have begun to hold 'writing-as-learning' seminars for interested faculty members, informal coffee meetings for parents who are interested in helping their children with language arts skills, established a monthly newsletter to snare building educational concerns and ideas (and to spread the word about the value of the proposed center), and other preliminary activities.

The more I study such a center, the more I realize I need to learn. I will undoubtedly be requesting assistance (or encouragement) from members of the WRITING LAB NEWS-LETTER network.


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NCTE'S 'CENTERS OF EXCELLENCE' SEARCH  
INCLUDES WRITING LABS, K-12

In the belief that many excellent teaching programs exist today in U.S. schools, the National Council of Teachers of English is mounting a nationwide search for such programs. A task force headed by Skip Nicholson, teacher of English at South Pasadena High School, California, developed the NCTE plan for identifying, recognizing, and publicizing exemplary programs for teaching many aspects of English language arts. NCTE is inviting schools to send the task force brief descriptions of programs, including writing centers, in K-12 programs. The panel will then identify programs to be examined in detail, send evaluators to visit these programs, and subsequently cite those judged to be outstanding as Centers of Excellence. Schools whose programs are honored would agree to share their ideas in writing and enable other school leaders to visit their programs.

The deadline for Proposing Programs for

recognition is May 15, 1985. Instructions for proposals were mailed to all classroom teachers of NCTE in mid-March, and completed applications should be sent to the Task Force on Demonstration Centers, c/o NCTE, 1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, Illinois 61801.

I am never as clear about any matter as when I have just finished writing about it.  
Van Allen

CALL FOR PROPOSALS

If you are interested in participating in the Special Interest Session for writing lab personnel at the 1986 Conference on College Composition and Communication in New Orleans (March 13-15, 1986), send your proposal for a 30-minute workshop to Jeanne Simpson, Writing Center/301 Coleman, Eastern Illinois University, Charleston, Illinois 61920. The deadline is May 25, 1985.

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