

WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER

Vol. II, No. 4 (December, 1977)

With the hope that this issue of the newsletter reaches you before your holiday break, I wish you a well deserved (and no doubt, much needed) vacation. But after your holiday, do continue to send your useful contributions, your questions, your suggestions (however brief), and your donations of two dollars (with checks made payable to me) to:

Muriel Harris, Editor
WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER
Department of English
Purdue University
West Lafayette, IN 47907



Job Opening

The University of Illinois (Chicago Circle campus) is seeking applicants with doctorates in Rhetoric, Composition, or English Education for the position of Asst. Professor of English (effective September 1, 1978) to direct its Writing Center, to teach and supervise undergraduate and graduate programs in English Education, and to participate in the composition program. Send curriculum vitae and a copy of one publication (if available) or requests for further information to:

Professor Daniel Lindley, Jr.
Department of English
University of Illinois at
Chicago Circle
Box 4348
Chicago, Illinois 60680

(Closing date for applications is January 1, 1978.)

Writing Lab Session at 1978 4 C's

After some correspondence between myself and William Irmischer, Program Chair for the Denver 4 C's Convention March 30--April 1, Irmischer has asked me to devise, organize, and direct a "special interest" session for Writing Lab directors. The session is Thursday, 3:30 - 5:30. I have decided to divide the session into two parts. During the first half I would like to have small group discussions, each on a different topic and led by someone knowledgeable. I would like the entire session to be sharing of information and solving of problems since I believe that when lab directors get together that's generally what happens. We don't really need speakers. So in the first half I hope to have small groups discussing real problems that affect our lab work. Among the topics I would like covered in individual groups are: staffing arrangements, instructional materials, administration, accountability, moving the lab beyond the English Department, tutoring techniques, diagnosis, etc.

In the second half I would like to bring together on an individual basis someone who has a problem and someone who can offer solutions--a sort of mini-consulting service.

I would like individuals who are going to Denver and who are qualified to be group discussion leaders on specific topics to write to me explaining what they could contribute. Once I have responses I'll select on the basis of expertise a variety of individuals to participate. If we can identify a cadre of experts, the second half of the session should go all right. Please write to me c/o Department of English, WVU, Morgantown, W. VA 26506.

Rudolph Almasy
West Virginia University

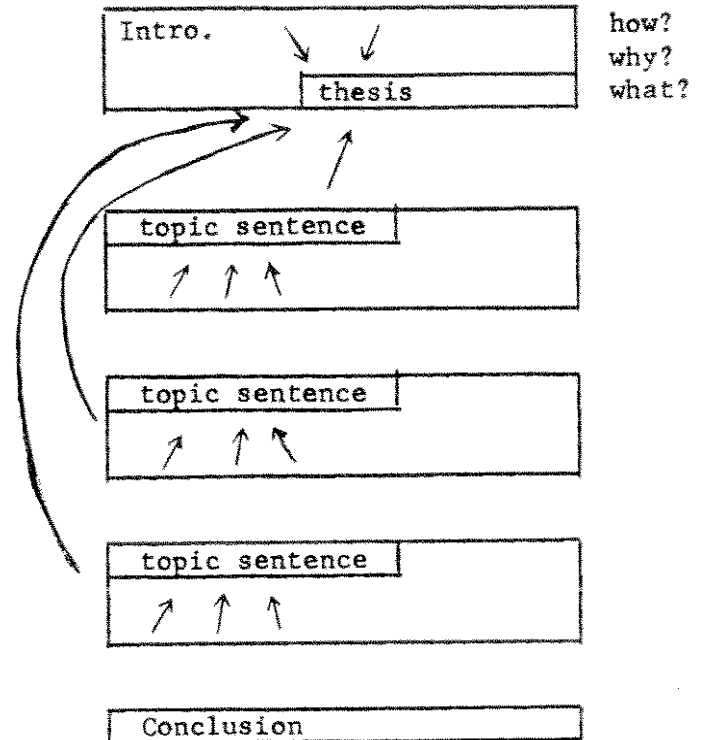
An Approach to Organization

In personal conferences at the St. Cloud State University Writing Clinic, we use a simplified but efficient approach to overall organization. We begin by defining a thesis sentence as a summary sentence containing the central idea of the theme. In our discussion and on a handout, we make these four points: each theme must have only one; it should be expressed as a sentence at the end of the introductory paragraph; it should fit the knowledge of the writer and the size of the theme; and it should not be just a fact.

Then we tell students to put themselves in the readers' place and determine how the readers would react if they read the thesis: would they ask how or why or what? Almost always one of those three questions automatically suggests itself. Continuing our discussion, we explain that the "big" answers to the question will become the main ideas for paragraphs. We illustrate by using examples such as this: if a reader sees the thesis "Deer hunting is an expensive sport," he will react by asking "why?" The "big" answers, elicited from the student, usually concern the cost of the equipment and license, of travel, and of food and lodging; then we explain that these three ideas can be stated as sentences which become topic sentences for four paragraphs. More examples are tried at this point.

In discussing the paragraphs themselves, we practice using the how, why, what approach again, this time in relation to the topic sentences. We emphasize that all the sentences in the paragraph must explain, support, or clarify the topic sentences through the use of specifics such as example and detail. We do have a separate handout on using specifics.

In order to present these ideas to students who are not verbally oriented, we use a handout with a "picture" of a short theme. The picture has five rectangular boxes with appropriate labels but a minimum of printing. The page looks like this:



The diagram provides a basis for discussion and is a tangible thing for the students to take with them and follow.

For students writing longer themes, we explain that the "big" answers now become ideas for sections of the theme and that the paragraphs with their topic sentences must now relate to the idea of each section. The section ideas, of course, relate to the thesis sentence. In succeeding interviews we may discuss specifics, transition, introductions, and conclusions, but by using the how, why, what method I have described, we can give the student a workable plan of organization within a half-hour interview.

Lorraine Perkins
St. Cloud State University

The Writing Laboratory
and the Graduate Student

Writing Labs often hear the call to move their services beyond the English Department and Freshman remedial writers. At WVU, we are doing just that through an effort which, if successful, could serve as a model to give needed training to graduate students enrolled in various graduate programs.

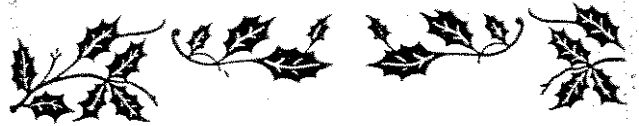
Our Writing Lab is working with all nine students who began in September, 1977, a doctoral program in "Behavior Analysis of Education" within the Department of Educational Psychology. Since all of these students are approximately at the same point in the program and enrolled in the same classes, we decided to use the first year of their residency to do our writing instruction. The lab works directly with these students' major professor who has made Lab writing instruction part of his program's requirement.

During the first semester we systematically gather writing samples (at least six) from these students in the form of papers written for their courses. These papers are analyzed to discover what writing instruction these students need. Interviews are also conducted with each student to discuss the kinds of writing being produced and the requirements for professional writing. The first semester then, allows us to gather data, assess needs, and profile each individual writer. From this information, an individual program of writing instruction is designed for each writer.

In the second semester of the first year in residency, students are given the writing instruction each needs through the Writing Lab on an individual basis. We will work with each student throughout the second semester in private tutorial as many times during each week as is convenient for the student. One staff member is assigned this instructional task to guarantee uniformity and maximum communication with the major professor. For the tutorials the instructor will use finished papers from first semester, papers in progress from the second semester, and the Lab's own instructional materials. To develop skills in revising and editing for these students, we expect each writer to generate a substantial amount of writing which can be critically examined and revised.

We feel confident that a semester-long, concentrated effort which requires graduate students to keenly examine their writing and compare it with acceptable academic prose will be sufficient to alert them to the necessity to write precisely, fully, and correctly in their graduate work. This program for graduate students uses the existing resources of our Lab, brings more students to us, and extends our services beyond the English Department. We are working diligently to make the pilot successful since this writing instruction through our Lab is the only systematic aid graduate students can find on campus to improve their writing.

Rudolph Almasy
West Virginia University



Using Smaller Learning Packages
in Labs

I work with a writing lab here at a small junior college that has many divisions and consequently a student body of diverse writing ability. I recently heard and talked with Benjamin Bloom in Chicago concerning his book about human characteristics and school learning. His research indicates that 80% of the students can achieve mastery compared with 20% in the traditional setting at a cost of 10-20% teacher effort and time. The setting in a writing lab certainly is not a traditional setting since much of the instruction is individualized. It would seem to me if we, as instructors in the writing lab, can devise smaller learning packages and employ Bloom's suggestions, higher achievement by a larger percentage of our students would be the result. Could the newsletter address itself to this issue?

Errol Erickson
North Dakota State
School of Science



Tutors and Materials Development at
East Texas State's Writing Center

Beginning a Writing Center
at Valparaiso

The Writing Center at East Texas State University serves the entire university, not just the remedial program, and still maintains a one-to-one tutoring atmosphere. Our tutors (six graduate students giving ten hours per week, two undergraduate giving seven hours per week, and one director giving forty hours per week) have been able to keep the personalized approach by developing the materials used in the Center.

Before the Center opens in the fall, the tutors attend a three day workshop designed to teach them the process of material development. They are introduced to various style manuals, reviewed on grammar and mechanics, and instructed in the various rhetorical modes which each discipline stresses. Each tutor is then assigned a handout to develop on one of the topic areas of the Center's syllabus. During a one-month period the tutor must decide what is "given", or what is the least the student should know of the subject-area in order to understand the concept. Notice that we teach the concept, or what is correct, rather than the error. The concept is then explained to the student in "plain English" without jargon. This step is often done visually by diagrams as well as through words. The student is then asked to work exercises which demand that he create his own sentences or paragraphs. Finally the student is told the error that results if he has not understood the concept. At the end of the month, each tutor goes over the process with the other tutors and fields questions about the hand-out.

We have found that having our tutors go through this process enables them to understand better the problems the students are having. Also, since the tutors have developed the materials themselves, they are so familiar with the substantive information that they are able to perform well with several students at once. Our university has been so impressed with our program that they increased our budget for this year, when no other new programs were funded and some budgets were cut.

Lil Brannon
East Texas State University

Perhaps others at smaller universities and colleges would be interested in how we organized our Writing Center at Valparaiso University. For the first year, we decided to staff it with members of the English Department before experimenting with student tutors. By vote, the department decided each member would spend an hour per week in the center, covering two possible tutoring sessions. We drew up a schedule for the semester which would scatter the tutorials throughout the week from mid-morning to late afternoon. Students wanting an appointment call the departmental secretary. The tutors then check the appointment book to see who is coming and what help he has requested. Usually the student's instructor will leave a note describing what aid he believes the student needs. And students are urged when they call to bring a writing sample with them. Primarily we serve students in our composition program, but we have tutored others, too.

So far we're very enthusiastic. The extra hour has not been much of a burden, and the new relationship with students is interesting and gratifying. For once, we're the coach and not the judge. (No doubt some of us have had to act as referee!) Serving as tutors does not mean we're not seeing our students for regular conferences. But it does mean that conference time can be spent talking about the coming assignment, rather than hashing over grammatical errors made on the last one.

Joyce Hicks
Valparaiso University

The Writing Center at RPI

Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute will open a Writing Center in January, 1978. The Center is part of a general program to encourage the improvement of writing in coursework throughout the Institute, thus providing a back-up resource for faculty and students.

The Center will function primarily as a voluntary, drop-in tutorial service which will offer

students individualized instruction in writing skills. Students may seek help for any writing problem or specific writing project. Most students will attend voluntarily through self-referral, but a limited number of students will be able to sign up for a regular weekly program for one semester-hour credit.

The Center will be centrally located on campus in the Library; it will be stocked with a variety of texts and will be open 20 hours per week. The staff will consist of one full-time professional, several graduate student assistants, and a part-time secretary.

The Center at RPI differs from most other tutoring services of this type in that its primary emphasis is not remedial, and it is not tied to a freshman composition program. Rather, the Center will offer an additional alternative to existing (elective) writing courses. The

Center will also serve as a training ground for our graduate students and as a focus for research on the teaching of writing. Center materials and staff will also be a resource for faculty, and we will work with individual faculty members to improve writing in their courses.

We would be interested in hearing from similar kinds of Centers (voluntary, non-remedial) and writing programs at similar institutions. Please write: Jennie Skerl, Writing Center Director, Department of Language, Literature, and Communications, RPI, Troy, N.Y. 12181.

Jennie Skerl
Rensselaer Polytechnic
Institute

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Bond, Tonette
Department of English
Randolph-Macon College
Ashland, Virginia 23005

Bryant, Ruby T.
Ellison 208
Virginia Union University
1500 N. Lombardy Street
Richmond, Virginia 23220

Carr, Sister Placide
English Department
Holy Family College
Grand and Frankford Avenue
Torresdale, Philadelphia, PA 19114

Demaree, William
Department of English
Purdue University
West Lafayette, Indiana 47907

Erickson, Errol
English Department
North Dakota State School of Science
Wahpeton, North Dakota 58075

Hartzog, John
Learning Resource Center, S. LIB. 112
California State University
18111 Nordhoff Street
Northridge, California 91330

Kolsky, Jim
Grossmont College
San Diego City Evening College
2967 Havasupai Avenue
San Diego, California 92117

O'Hearn, Carolyn
Department of English
Arizona State University
Tempe, Arizona 85281

Perrin, Elaine
Department of English
Lubbock Christian College
5601 W. 19th Street
Lubbock, Texas 79407

Schnitz, Clair Jo
2114 Arizona Avenue
El Paso, Texas 79930

Silverman, Larry, Humanities Division
Seattle Central Community College
1718 Broadway
Seattle, Washington 98122

Smith, R. La Marr
Department of English
Emory and Henry College
Emory, Virginia 24327

Stone, Virginia
Department of English and Philosophy
Del Mar College
Baldwin and Ayers
Corpus Christi, Texas 78404

University of Southern Colorado
Treasurer's Office
2200 Bonforte Blvd.
Pueblo, Colorado 81001