



# WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER

Vol. III, No. 7 (March, 1979)

We continue to look forward to receiving your articles for the newsletter, names of new members for the mailing list, and donations of \$2 (with checks made payable to me) to help defray the duplicating and mailing costs. Please write to:

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WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER  
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West Lafayette, IN 47907



Basic College Writing is a new composition text written by Laurie Kirszner, a member of our newsletter group who described her "instant writing workshop" in the February 1978 issue of the newsletter. Her textbook, written with Stephen Mandell, is advertised as "a practical step-by-step guide to writing the short thesis-and-support paper . . . designed specifically for college students who lack the experience and resources to plan, write, and revise short expository pieces at a college level." The text is available from W. W. Norton and Co. (224 pages, \$4.59 paper, with teacher's manual).

## POSITION AVAILABLE

Writing Lab Director needed at Central Connecticut College, starting Fall 1979. Full-time, tenure track appointment at assistant professor rank. Twelve semester hour load, half as director of the Writing Center and half as teacher of journalism courses. By fall the Writing Center will have been in operation for only one semester, allowing a new director much flexibility in developing the fledgling facility. Appropriate experiences in writing labs and in journalism are required. Salary: \$14,850. Send resume and inquiries to Professor Ross J. Baiera, Chairman, English Department, Central Connecticut State College, New Britain, CT. 06050.

## Birthing A Writing Lab

When it's your turn to write a doctoral dissertation, the best authorities to consult are people who have just completed one. They have experienced it only once, but they surely know all the problems intimately. As I have recently completed plans for a writing center at our college, my experience might be helpful to others presently in the process of organizing such a facility.

Although professors and administrators on our campus talked about having a writing lab for years, and I was the logical one to organize it, I have been in the education business long enough to know not to volunteer. I thus told my superiors I would be delighted to plan a writing lab whenever they provided adequate time in my teaching schedule for me to do so. When falling enrollments increased recruitment of less able students, and the college became more and more concerned about the writing performance of our students, the administration eventually released me from one-fourth of my teaching load for one semester to plan a lab.

That experience leads me to my first piece of advice for planners of labs: don't try it unless you have been given adequate time to plan and unless you have key administrators behind it. At Central I have a dean (of Arts and Sciences) who supported and pushed, and two vice-presidents who cooperated on things they never cooperated on before. By the time I started my planning, they didn't need to be convinced of the need for a lab. And once I laid out my plans and they made the right phone calls, I got almost everything we needed to open a writing center: a room, desks, shelves, typewriters, paper and other necessary supplies, money for tutors, secretarial help, and a promise of some sort of budget for the future.

Other than having a cooperative administra-

tion, the most important aspect of my planning experience was talking with people who direct and work in other labs. Reading about labs in professional publications and in newsletters such as this one is helpful, yes. But talking personally and corresponding with knowledgeable people was most helpful. I met first with the directors of three labs within easy driving distance of my home and campus, and later with people from half a dozen labs around the country at various national conferences I happened to be attending (though the college unfortunately did not provide funds for my travel to those conferences). The most significant thing I learned from those people is that every lab is different; every institution has different needs and a different clientele. Some labs function primarily in conjunction with freshman English courses where students are required to attend so many sessions in the lab. At other schools, the lab caters almost entirely to walk-ins. Many places do both to various extents. Each institution must decide what kind of system will serve students best.

What, then, can be learned from other labs if they function so differently? I learned:

1) A good lab needs an imaginative, flexible, and sympathetic director and competent, sensitive tutors. (I'm not sure how or where you find those kinds of people; you have to be lucky, I guess.) The director must not only be knowledgeable about a variety of materials and methods for tutoring students with writing problems, he or she must also be able to establish a relaxed, informal atmosphere in the writing center; gain the confidence of students in need of help; be respected among the faculty of the college and especially of the English department; train, lead, direct, assist, supervise, and evaluate the lab's tutors; and find imaginative ways of informing the faculty as well as students across the campus about the services available in the writing center.

2) A lab can benefit from a lot of materials, though exactly which ones is not certain. Every lab uses different resources. And most labs which start off using pre-packaged tapes and workbooks, eventually use them less and less and utilize tutors on a one-on-one basis more and more.

3) A good lab will meet a variety of needs: helping drop-ins with immediate problems of several sessions for students with long-range problems, and running mini-workshops

on useful topics--such as how to write effective essays on mid-term exams or how to footnote research papers in biology--from time to time.

4) The least effective kind of instructors to use in a writing lab are regular English department members. Graduate assistants usually work better; so do ex-housewives with MA's in English who want to do something with their lives and don't mind teaching for \$4.00 an hour. Peer tutors function fairly well with proper guidance, even students who have earned no better than C's in composition classes.

5) A system for making appointments, scheduling tutorial sessions, and responding to referrals from faculty is essential.

6) An initial training session and follow-up weekly meetings are vital for discussing techniques of helping students with writing problems (and not merely criticizing their errors or writing their papers for them).

7) Advertising in college publications and informing instructors throughout the institution about the offerings of the writing center will attract more clients to the services of the lab while also making for good PR.

8) When instructors refer students to the lab, the lab will benefit from an instructor's description of the student's problems, and later the instructor will benefit from knowing what help the student received. So any referral procedure should begin and end with memos and/or phone calls between the lab and faculty members.

9) To run any lab effectively, the director needs to devote at least half of his or her teaching load to the lab facility. Anything less will make the lab unfairly ineffective for students and probably suicidal for a conscientious director who will attempt to do far more work than the college schedule gives him credit for.

Most importantly, if you're trying to start a writing center, you've got to push. You've got to decide what you need, and then keep after the necessary authorities to get it; the deans, the vice-presidents, the supplies officer, the purchasing department, the maintenance workers. They usually don't produce what you need unless you keep after them. (It took two memos, three phone calls, a personal visit, and three weeks to get a

set of keys made for our lab door.) Birthing a lab is a time-consuming and complex process.

I don't know how good our writing center will be. But it at least exists now, and, while I'm writing this, students are beginning to make their appointments to get the kind of help they need. I think we're ready to give it to them.

Donald R. Gallo  
Central Connecticut  
State College



#### BOOK REVIEW

Feinstein, George W. Programed Writing Skills.  
Prentice-Hall, Inc.

In a programed format, Programed Writing Skills covers a wide range of writing problems, including style, clarity, the sentence, mechanics, grammar, spelling, punctuation, the paragraph, and the composition. Like other programed materials, Programed Writing Skills is useful for Writing Labs because it enables students to work independently. Its specific advantages over other programed writing and grammar materials are that in many areas it stresses writing skills rather than grammar, the examples and exercises are amusing, and each of the chapters is relatively short. A weakness of the book is the attempt to teach the paragraph and the composition in a programed format. Another possible drawback is the assumption that the student already has some knowledge of grammar. Programed Writing Skills can best be used for students needing a rapid review of an area, for those who need to become aware of certain problems in writing, or for those who can pick up new information quickly.

I would like to urge other WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER members to share some of your opinions about books or materials which you have successfully or unsuccessfully used. The following information concerning a book or materials would be useful: author's name, title, publisher, approximate price, content, usefulness, and weaknesses. Please send this information to me at the Cooperative Learning Center, Southeastern Massachusetts University, North Dartmouth, Mass. 02747. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Susan Glassman  
Writing Lab Director  
Southeastern Mass. Univ.



#### THE WRITING LABORATORY AT WILLIAM CAREY COLLEGE: A TUTORIAL APPROACH

In attempting to meet the needs of the underprepared student, the Department of Special Programs in conjunction with the Department of English at William Carey College has instituted a writing laboratory. The writing lab is a unique innovation which features, among other aspects, a strong tutorial relationship--not more than five students per instructor--and a reading component.

Students are placed according to the results of a diagnostic test of English grammar and usage, given to all incoming freshmen prior to the opening of classes. Accordingly, students may proceed directly into English 101, regular composition, or English 100, developmental English. If students are placed into English 100, they will be given an additional writing test consisting of a short summary of an article excerpt, to determine if results of the diagnostic were accurate predictors of writing ability. Finally, students are given the California Reading Test to help determine reading ability.

The reading component is perhaps the most innovative and holds the largest potential for development. Students who are having trouble with vocabulary and/or comprehension are given SRA materials to read and write about. On the other hand, students who need remedial-type instruction in basic reading skills are given that opportunity. An underlying philosophy of the writing laboratory is that writing and reading are viewed on a continuum of language skills, which also include important oral tasks of listening and speaking. Because writing and reading are the two most important and demanding skills required in college work, they are, therefore, given priority.

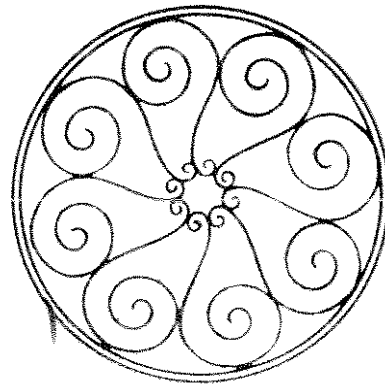
A second unique approach to the solving of writing problems is the inclusion of the English 100 instructor as both English instructor and writing lab coordinator. This "double-role" insures continuity between the classroom, where practice in usage is provided along with some grammatical explanation and discussion, and the writing lab, where the focus is naturally on writing per se.

"Writing" as defined at the developmental level is writing at the broadest range of

meaning. This means the gamut from phrases and sentences to paragraph writing and, in small instances, full-length themes. The majority of students are presently working on paragraph writing. A small percentage are unable to handle this, some because of reading problems, others because of weak writing skills. The students with severe reading problems are referred to the reading center for a minimum of eight class sessions in lieu of work in the writing lab. As is always the case, a very few of our students were inadequately placed, the dichotomy between the diagnostic test and writing performance being too large. The program has a built-in system of flexibility, however, in that some of our better students will receive credit for English 101 (regular composition), even though they are enrolled in English 100. Obviously, such students are not in need of remedial work in writing and are therefore free to work independently on multiparagraph essays.

We are working strongly, of course, to administer an efficient system, attempting to provide some "management of individualization," but our strong point really lies in our small one-to-one learning environment which is characteristic of William Carey College as a whole. We feel that our beginning efforts are relatively successful largely because of this tutorial base. Only a careful evaluation at semester's end and in the years to come will determine if our overall approach is indeed as appropriate as we feel it is.

Louis Miron  
 Writing Laboratory  
 Coordinator  
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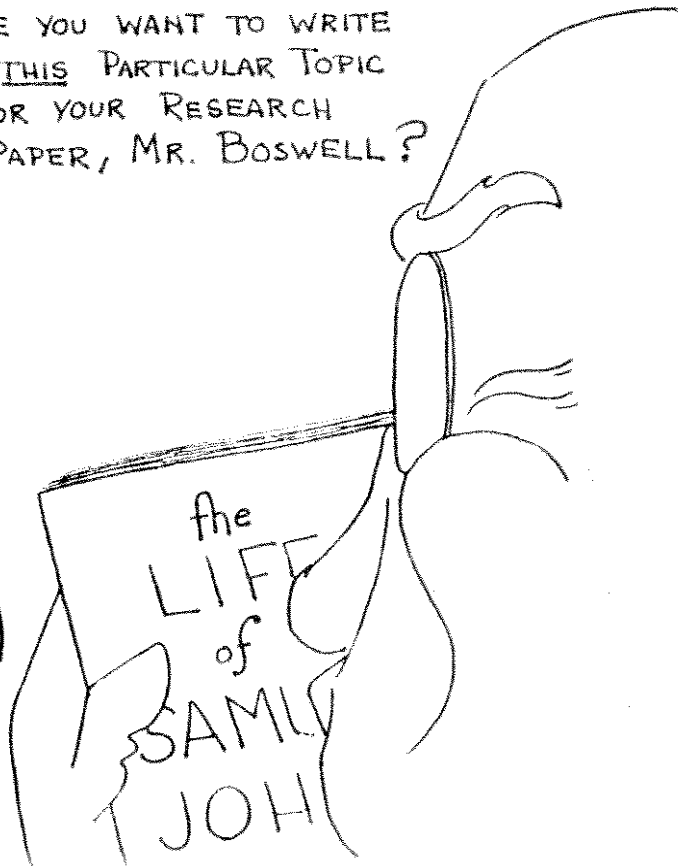


The writing laboratory, in conclusion, is William Carey's commitment to individualized instruction. Although the writing program borrows readily from a similar, though larger, one at Cuyahoga Community College in Cleveland, Ohio, ours is unique, we feel, because of the commitment to a "tutorial approach."

GREAT MOMENTS IN  
 WRITING-LAB HISTORY

#/0

BUT YOUR JOURNAL IS FULL OF SUCH  
INTERESTING STUFF — ARE YOU  
 SURE YOU WANT TO WRITE  
 ON THIS PARTICULAR TOPIC  
 FOR YOUR RESEARCH  
 PAPER, MR. BOSWELL?



WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER MAILING LIST-Supplement #18

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