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## The Writing Center: a tutor's view

My experience as a tutor in the BSU Writing Center began with an internship last semester. Because I am an English major with a writing emphasis, the center offered me an opportunity to see the kinds of problems students encounter in their writing. Having this close working relationship with students and their writing problems has enabled me to develop the skills I needed to help students overcome their problems.

During my tutoring hours, students may come to the center with a particular problem they are having with a paper, or they may be having trouble just getting started writing. Typically, I will sit down with a student for a half hour or so and discuss the problem she has encountered. Before going further, I must give a warning: I am not a proofreader, nor can the student expect a "quick fix" job on a paper that is due in an hour. But for most students I can act as a guide, questioning them, helping them see new directions in their writing, and nudging them into new avenues of thought which they perhaps would not have seen without this interaction. My goal as a tutor is not to do any of the student's writing or thinking, but to help the student develop skills for becoming a better writer.

Many students are reluctant to talk about what they write; when queried about it a familiar response is, "It's just something I wrote; I don't really care about it." My job is to get over this initial response and help the student to realize that writing is important and that no one ever writes a paper without feeling something about it. On the other hand there's the student who is too close to the writing. The student feels so strongly about the topic that it is difficult, sometimes painful, to talk

about it. I recently tutored a student who had written an essay about her mother. I told her that, though the essay was very good, a physical description of her mother would have made it stronger. The response I received was a flood of tears! Only then did she inform me that her mother had died just six weeks before. Obviously the topic was one the student would have been better off to set aside for a while -- or written about in a private journal instead of an essay. The incident taught me a lesson in tact and how carefully one must tread around people's writing.

I also learned, generally, that the important thing is to get the student to talk about the writing, so that I don't end up reciting a monologue about the paper instead of listening to the student.

Paul Holt

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## "Designer Workshops" offer is still open

The Writing Center's offer to give workshops, which we published in the first issue of Word Works brought a lively response. We have so far given workshops for classes in management, marketing, and physical education, and have scheduled more for history and teacher education. We are delighted with the number and range of departments requesting our services. The semester is still young, and the offer is still open.

Even if you have only a vague idea of what your students might need in the way of writing instruction, give us a call. We'll talk it over with you and design a series of activities to help them master the writing they do for your classes. Call 385-1288.

# What happens to students' writing skills?

That question comes up again and again when teachers of writing talk with faculty in other departments. The students may be in an introductory freshman course or a graduate seminar, but the question is always the same. A great many students do not seem to write up to a level expected of them by their instructors.

The problem has many causes, but perhaps the central one lies in the design of the typical college curriculum. Writing instruction for most students is concentrated into their first year of college. The assumption seems to be that English 101 and 102 prepare them for college writing once and for all, and they need no further instruction or practice.

Such an assumption ignores a couple of basic truths about writing. One truth is that no one ever stops learning how to write (see the quote from Donald Murray in Word Works 1). Every new subject brings new challenges, and every new writing project worth doing is a voyage on uncharted seas.

## Writer and (or vs.) Subject

Another truth is that the relationship between writer and subject is complex. Though writing in all fields is essentially the same as far as the process the writer goes through, big differences will appear in the product depending on how well the writer understands the subject. A student who can write a geology paper that is clear and tightly organized might turn around and produce a history paper that is badly organized and full of vague, unclear, awkward sentences. The difference is that she knows a lot about geology and feels at home with it, but she finds that history comes harder and she has to fight the subject all the way.

The typical college curriculum tells students by its very design that they aren't necessarily expected to carry knowledge and skills over from one discipline to another. We hear students talk about getting their English courses "out of the way," as if they'll never again have to worry about taking pains over their writing. (This happens not only with English, of course.) Advisors sometimes unwittingly reinforce the notion by using the same expression when helping their advisees plan their class schedules.

## What can be done?

The obvious solution is to assign more writing in all courses. But some assignments yield little return in improved writing for the time and energy invested in them. Term papers, for instance, provide excellent practice in digging deeply into a subject and expanding one's knowledge. But they are very difficult to write well. If students have not been encouraged to write all along, to get used to handling the subject-matter of the course in their own language, they may well not be ready to produce good term papers. Result: cut-and-paste jobs, plagiarism intended and unintended, and frustration for themselves and their instructors. This is true no matter how well they may have performed in their high school or college English classes.

Frequent writing activities -- journals, in-class freewritings, and other informal writing -- can foster in students the habit of using writing as a way of thinking about their subjects.

Just to use freewriting as an example: students can be asked to do a five-minute writing at the beginning of the hour (not to be graded, not necessarily to be handed in) summarizing the important ideas they remember from the assigned reading or from the previous class. They can write at the end of the hour, wrapping up the session and writing down questions left unanswered for next time. They can even write in the middle of the hour. When the class bogs down on a difficult problem, the instructor can stop discussion and have everyone write about it for a few minutes. Usually what won't come clear any other way will start to come clear when the students try writing it down. If the students compare their freewritings in small groups, those who have got it wrong can correct themselves.

Activities such as these will help students to make a habit of using writing to explore ideas and clarify their thinking. When writing becomes a habit, a natural way of working out problems, then the student has a chance to grow as a writer.

