

wordworks

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From the Editor . . .

***Lib Thatcher**

Writing Assistant, Editor

Helping Students Become Better Writers

•Dennis Owens

Writing Assistant

While reading Dennis Owens' excellent essay, "Helping Students Become Better Writers," I kept thinking of the statement, "Give a man a fish and he eats for a day. Teach a man to fish and he eats for a lifetime." "The sole purpose of the writing center," says Owens, "is to help individuals to help themselves become better writers." By simply correcting a student's paper, we rob him or her of the opportunity to learn: we may give him a fish for lunch, but by supper, he is already hungry again.

We can show students how to cast and reel in their own lines by putting students at ease and showing them new techniques and ways of approaching writing, and by building confidence and a desire to become better writers. I have heard students many times say, "I don't know anything about grammar." And my response is always the same: "Of course you do. Can you speak English? Yes. Do you say, 'Store I go to the?' Of course not. Then you know grammar." Invariably the students are surprised: "Can it be that simple?" they ask.

Yes, it can be that simple. Developing a love for writing and an enthusiasm for writing is what we are about. By teaching students correct punctuation, mechanics, and organization skills rather than simply editing papers, we empower them to take control of their own writing.

These skills are the tools-the tackle, rod and reel-which will enable students to reap a veritable discatory feast of new ideas and ways of writing.

As any writing assistant will attest, the objective of the writing center is not to edit a student's paper, nor is it to write the paper for the student. The sole purpose of the writing center, they will say, is to help individuals to help themselves become better writers. To fulfill this objective, an assistant must first recognize her primary responsibility in this process. Following this, the assistant must strive to dispel, within a student's mind, two common fallacies about writing: the assumption that to write well, a person must first be proficient in grammar and sentence structure; and the misconception that writing, like the ability to sing, is a talent that one must be born with.

Although it seems to absolve a fair amount of responsibility, the statement "Helping students to help themselves" does not accurately convey the frustrating dilemmas confronted by writing assistants. It would be much simpler for the assistant to serve as an editor of sorts, pointing out the punctuation changes needed or suggesting words and phrases that would better convey the intent of the author. As most assistants soon discover, it is very difficult to guide writers into discovering for themselves where problems within a paper lie, and then to allow students to formulate solutions on their own.

Occasionally, the writing assistant feels too inadequate to clearly express why an error should be changed, unsure herself of the terminology or specific rule which applies. In these instances, the assistant will often do the

work for the student. Many students willingly allow this, convinced that the assistant is much more capable than they themselves are. While an essay co-written by the assistant may result in a desired grade, it most often robs the student of an opportunity to develop essential writing skills.

When the assistant realizes that her primary responsibility lies with the student and not the paper, setting realistic goals becomes a simpler task. The first priority of each tutorial is to send the student away from the center a better writer than when he first arrived. Steven North, in "Training Tutors to Talk About Writing," states:

At the end of a tutorial session, it is the writer who should be changed, who has a new way of seeing what has been written. or of thinking about audience, or of feeling about the hard work of writing. If the writing improves, so much the better. But it's the writer we work on; the text is essentially the medium. (439)

For some students, progress will come in the form of new-found strategies for developing ideas such as starring or cubing. For some, growth will be a result of recently learned revision techniques or a new perspective on the text in question. Another student may simply learn how to locate and eliminate comma splices.

Exceptional papers are not the objective of the writing center, but a natural result of students who discover within themselves the confidence and ability required to solve writing challenges. In another article entitled "The Idea of a Writing Center," North writes:

Our job is to produce better writers, not better writing . . . In the center . . . we look beyond or through that particular project, that particular text, and see it as an occasion for addressing our primary concern, the process by which it is produced. (438)

Of course, "exceptional" in relation to composition, is a relative term. Each student writes on a different level of expertise. When this level is adequately assessed, the assistant's perception of "improvement" will fluctuate with each different student. In "Teaching the Other Self: The Writer's First Reader," Donald M. Murray relates the importance of accurate evaluation of what level the student is writing on: "...the effective teacher must teach where the student is, not where the teacher wishes the student was" (144).

The most productive task an assistant can engage in is to determine the strengths and weaknesses in a student's writing, and then with the student, collectively decide what aspects or challenges to address first. Unfortunately, many inexperienced writers are not confident that they have the potential to write well. Several misconceptions lead to this inferior attitude. The assistant can dispel this attitude if she is perceptive to the specific needs of each student.

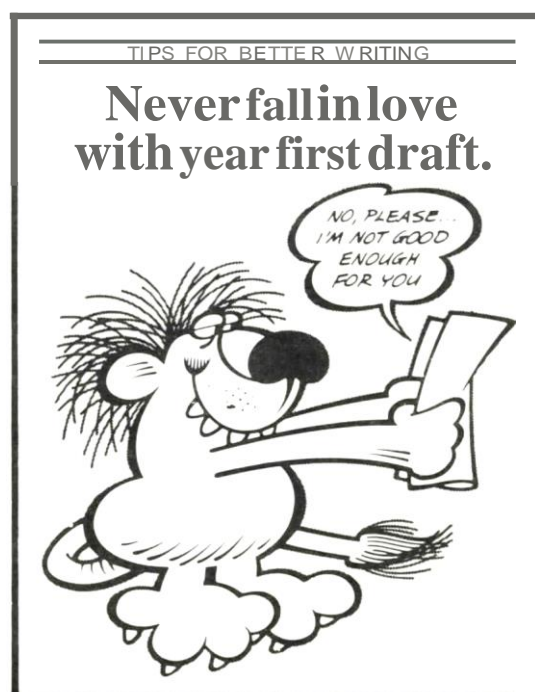
The first fallacy that should be corrected is the false assumption that good writing is primarily dependent on correct grammar and mechanics. Even experienced writers feel inadequate in the area of punctuation and structure, so it is not surprising that inexperienced writers find this aspect of writing exceptionally challenging. The most often repeated phrases from students are indicative of this concern:

"I don't know much about grammar."

"I really need some help with my punctuation."

"Would you edit this paper for me?"

This feeling of inadequacy is most likely an extension of the emphasis placed, and rightly so, on the structure of phrases and sentences throughout the individual's education. In "Paradigms and Problems: Needed Research in Rhetorical Invention," Richard E. Young illustrates how current attitudes concerning the teaching of writing are simply an extension of views prevalent in the Romantic Era. Priorities have changed little:



...emphasis (is) on the composed product rather than the composing process: the analysis of discourse into words, sentences, and paragraphs ... the strong concern with usage (syntax, spelling, punctuation). . .(29)

Correct grammar is essential to the concise and accurate expression of ideas. Writers often do educators a great disservice when they condemn this emphasis placed on structure. Every well-developed talent requires meticulous attention to the basic and fundamental principles of that art: writing is no exception to this rule.

Unfortunately, many students never progress beyond the limits inherently established by this narrow conception of writing. To perceive writing solely as the correct application of mechanical regulations is to ignore one of the most important aspects of the writing process: the invention and development of ideas.

During the development stage, emphasis is placed on the concepts and ideas expressed, not simply on how these elements are structured in a sentence. Writing assistants have the unique opportunity to guide the student through this phase of writing, helping him generate and elaborate on various ideas relevant to the student's topic. The non-threatening environment of the writing center provides the ideal atmosphere for the assistant to serve as a "sounding-board" for the student.

"... all writers would have their own ready auditor ... who would not only listen but draw them out, ask them questions they would not think to ask themselves" (North, Writing Center, 440). As the assistant listens intently to what the student is attempting to convey, she can ask questions of the writer that will encourage him to more carefully consider his topic and ideas. Questions should be direct and open such as: "How did you feel when this happened?" "What do you mean when you say this?" "What do you think about this idea?"

It will not take long for the student to see that the writing process involves so much more than simply structuring words and phrases. On the other hand, if a writing assistant is preoccupied with correcting each grammatical error, the student will perceive this as the highest priority with the process of writing, confirming the already prevalent notion that mechanics take precedence over other aspects of writing.

The second fallacy commonly believed by

most inexperienced writers is the idea that writing, like other "coo-given" talents, is an inborn gift. This conception holds that there are those who are "born" to write and then there are the rest who must remain content to merely read what has been written. This idea is understandable considering that the only standard with which an inexperienced writer can compare his own, rough, unpolished work are the finished, perfected works of published authors.

Undoubtedly there are a few authors who demonstrate an extraordinary knack for written expression. These are they who perpetuate this notion of "inherent ability." Unusually gifted authors do for would-be writers what Mozart has always done for musical composers: occasionally inspire, but most often intimidate. The gifted also make it very difficult to convince the inexperienced writer that the desire to write well is not necessarily an impossible ideal.

For the student who believes in the idea of inherent ability, it is essential that the assistant demonstrate that most writers, including themselves, experience the same challenges and frustrations in writing that the student does. Even renowned authors would find it embarrassing to include, as part of a published book or novel, all of the invention and developmental drafts that were required to create a piece of good writing. The same inefficiencies and blunders which characterize the drafts of the inexperienced can also be found in the attempts of the works of renowned authors.

It is ideal that the assistant can often easily relate to the student's frustrations in writing. In admitting weakness in composition, the assistant can alleviate a student's apprehension about his own weaknesses in writing. Although many assistants consider themselves novices, they must realize that they are in fact respected as having some ability in, or grasp of, the writing experience.

In relating their own experiences in writing, assistants are in an ideal position to share with students various strategies which they have used to solve writing challenges. Most students are very enthusiastic about learning even a few of the many exercises related to the process of writing such as brain-storming, freewriting, and looping.

The greatest thing that an assistant can do for an inexperienced writer is to help him develop confidence in this ability or potential to write well. Every paper, regardless of how unpolished, fragmented or incoherent it may be, has certain commendable elements within

it. Obviously insincere or superficial compliments are easily seen through and will only lead the student to believe that the assistant could find nothing to praise. However, great emphasis should be placed on focusing attention onto the elements within the paper that work well.

The successful writer does not so much correct error as discover what is working and extend that element in the writing. The writer . . . concentrates on making the entire piece of writing have the effectiveness of the successful fragment. The responsive teacher is always attempting to get the student to bypass the global evaluations of failure-"I can't write about this," "It's an airball," "I don't have anything to say"-and move into an element that is working well. (Murray, 140)

Writing centers provide a unique environment where students can acquire the skills and, more importantly, the attitudes so essential for exceptional writing. Ideally, the student, as a writer, takes precedence over every other aspect involved in the center, including the composition itself. If the writing assistant is not consistently aware of this fact, the center cannot possibly fulfill its objective. More importantly, if the assistant does not aid the student in developing the personal confidence needed to improve as a writer, then the center has essentially fallen short of its goal to help individuals to help themselves become better writers.

Silhouette at Dusk

The black bird glides on silken wings,
Floating through the collaged sky
That melts into the sun:
Circling again and again
Like the second hand on the clock,
Forming a silhouette on the sun at dusk.

*Jennifer Hasratian
St. Joseph Writing Assistant

My Phantom

*Teri Hall
Student, W. S. U.

All my life I've had a phantom, a woman living inside of me. It's the ghost of Donna Reed. I met her, and I've been trying to kill her ever since. I know that if I give in to this phantom, I will turn into a valium junky.

The phantom stands 5'6". She wears a size four dress and very light make-up (so not to look like a whore). She has blond bouffant hair with a pink bow in it. She always wears a dark hourglass-shaped dress and sensible pumps.

My phantom sings love songs while she is cleaning the toilets. Donna always has a feather duster in one hand and a power broom in the other. She loves making brownies from scratch. She always has a grand roast in the oven. Donna enjoys teaching her two-year-old son latin, physics, and the french horn. Every evening, she lays out her husband's clothes and meticulously checks them to make sure there are no wrinkles, loose threads, or stains. When my phantom finds some leisure time, she makes tea and cookies for the old, neighbor lady. She volunteers at the local hospital, and she is PTA president.

Every morning as I am leaving for school, the phantom sneaks out from the shadows. She whispers soft, loving, motherly things in my ears. The phantom tugs at my book bag ever so gently, saying "Stay home. Cook a voluptuous dinner. Read books to your son. Reorganize the cupboards."

Once I get to school, the phantom slips back into the dark corners of my being, letting me, the student, do my work. The phantom stays quiet. But, I know she's still there.

When I get home, the phantom becomes more visible. As soon as I get started on my studies, she sends my son in to ask for a drink, a cookie, and a playmate. Donna tells me lies. She says, "That laundry is going to come to life and eat your books if you don't take care of it." I get a sadistic enjoyment out of making frozen dinners for my son and my husband: Donna becomes so very angry and frustrated. Last time I made frozen dinners, she hit me on the side of the head with a spatula.

I realized that evening that I must kill or at least cripple the ghost of Donna Reed. I periodically dig deep within my soul to find the heart of this phantom. I found it once. I stretched out my hand and grasped her heart.

We had a great struggle, and I wounded her. I suddenly felt very sad. Maybe I don't need to kill her. Maybe we can work together and become as one.

Want to Publish?

-wordworks

Submissions: Lib Thatcher's box
(in Writing Center)
Deadlines: None. **wordworks** is printed twice quarterly.
Categories: Articles, poems, stories, quotes, news items, etc.

-Freshman Writing Contest

Submissions: English Department Office
SS 314
Deadlines: March 20, 1991
Categories: Essay or narrative and research
Requirements: Open to students with 60 or fewer credit hours at time of submission.

-Writing Lab Newsletter

Submissions: Muriel Harris, editor
Department of English
Purdue University
West Lafayette, IN 47907
Categories: Articles-eight to twelve
Reviews-three to four
double-spaced pages
Tutor's column-one to two
double-spaced pages

-The Utah Writer

Categories: Adult fiction and non-fiction, children's corner, poetry, prose

More information on all of these opportunities is available in the Writing Center.

WINNERS OF THE FIRST WRITING CENTER ASSOCIATES WRITING CONTEST

ESSAY

FIRST PLACE
ANNETTE TITENSOR
SECOND PLACE
DIANE KULKARNI
THIRD PLACE
ALICE CRITTENDON

FICTION

FIRST PLACE
KATHY NELSON
SECOND PLACE
JOICE ZABRIESKIE

POETRY

FIRST PLACE
KRISTA MASON
SECOND PLACE
JENNIFER ELKINGTON
THIRD PLACE
DIANE KULKARNI

These winners will be published in the next issue of "The Utah Writer."

The Writing Center Associates
will be sponsoring
another contest
spring quarter.

Entries should
address the theme of
"Autumn."

Deadline for submission is
April 25th 12:00p.m.

Submissions will be accepted
in the Writing Center.

Writing Assistants

Weber State Writing Center

Luana Au
Brandon Baxter
Monica Blume
Heidi Brown
Jennifer Elkington
Michelle Emery
Kathleen Gooch
Karen Hayhurst
Jackie Holbrook
Sherri Jensen
Julie Judd
Tina Kelley
Diane Kulkarni
Brent Mark
Kathy Nelson
Dennis Owens
Nicole Phillips
Marion Pust
Liesa Stockdale
Elizabeth Thatcher
Sanna Thompson
Heather Weymouth
Jeanie Wiecks

St. Joseph Catholic High School

JoAnn Ahrensbach
Liz Freimuth
Jennifer Hasratian
Theresa Jenkins
Dawn Kingsbury
Michael Yount

Statement of Purpose: The Writing Center
•**Dr. John Schwiebert**
Writing Center Director

Starred by undergraduate students (writing assistants), the Writing Center is a unique place where W. S. C. students can receive feedback on their writing in a comfortable, non-threatening environment. The Center seeks to help all students, of all levels of writing ability, at any stage of the writing process. Trained writing assistants ask questions, listen, demonstrate techniques of invention, drafting, and revising, and provide an attentive and challenging audience for the student writer. Rather than "fixing" or proofreading papers, we model strategies so that students can help themselves to become better writers. In this way the Center fosters independent thinking, promotes a collaborative spirit, and improves intellectual growth and writing ability.

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writing center

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