

THE COE WRITING CENTER AND THE COE WRITING PROGRAM

A few words about the Coe Writing Program. In 1984 Coe's faculty adopted a new curriculum that put in place a formal Writing-Across-the-Curriculum program (WAC). This WAC program places the responsibility for writing instruction on faculty in all disciplines. The idea is that faculty will introduce writing assignments in many different classes, often identified as Writing Emphasis (WE). Rather than relying on one or more first-year composition classes, the curriculum is designed to strengthen academic writing skills by providing students with many writing situations in many classes. Coe offers about 200 WE courses per year (including the First-Year Seminar sections), taught by over 70 different instructors.

The role of the Writing Center is to support the WAC program by assisting students with their writing assignments. One fundamental WAC principle is that writers benefit from multiple readers--different readers provide different styles of assistance in helping writers learn how to read and revise their own work. The task of the Coe Writing Center is to offer student writers an outsider's opinion on an assignment or a paper. By working with a CWC staff member, students should discover new ways of improving their skills as thinkers and writers.

This kind of consulting requires complex skills and can often be frustrating. Some papers are difficult to comprehend, some students can also be difficult. Many student writers become defensive as they protect their texts from alien readers. Fortunately for us, and for the majority of students using our services, the Writing Center often proves to be a rewarding and satisfying environment. We have helped many students make significant gains in their reading and writing skills; in the process we also gain insight into personalities, the nature of the writing process, and the dynamics of teaching through conferences.

Everyone who has worked in the Writing Center will testify that the only way to learn how to be a consultant is to do it. The skills can only be honed by experience. Self-confidence will come as you begin to have successful conferences. Nonetheless, Pasteur was certainly right when he suggested that chance favors the prepared mind. The purpose of this Handbook (and of the Topics in Composition course required for Writing Center staff members) is to increase the likelihood of your preparation leading to success.

“Forget grammar and think potatoes.” --Gertrude Stein

THOUGHTS ON WORKING WITH STUDENTS' WRITING

• **Writing is a social process.** Most of our schooling nurtures the idea of the writer as the lonely hermit, solely responsible for composing a text. But writing seldom works that way. Walk into a newspaper building and you see far more talk than you see writing. The final copy is often the result of many conferences among writers, section chiefs, and editors. The same principle works in professional scholarships. Writers in academic fields are constantly relying on their peers and professional editors for helping them develop and refine their texts. Most businesses follow the same practices. The Writing Center is dedicated to cultivating an exchange of ideas in the writing process. The Writing Center is an institutional cafe, a space where people come to drink coffee, eat Jolly Ranchers, and talk about ideas. One of the easiest ways to learn how to write is by talking about the writing: let the tongue compose meaning.

• **Process and product are important.** Our consulting often concentrates initially on how the writing is produced. Our job is to "highlight" the strategies good writers use. In many instances this involves helping students to become aware of what they are doing. An author's reliance on instinct is both attractive and absolutely necessary, but the practice of a conscious technique is essential for getting most jobs done. Someone once wrote: "Develop an infallible technique and then place yourself at the mercy of inspiration." Our job is to help student writers develop a technique so they are better prepared to listen to the muse when she chooses to sing.

• **The writing process is cyclical and recursive, not linear.** Good writers often behave like sheep dogs, moving backwards and sideways in order to move the ideas forward. Students need guidance and support as they move back and forth between planning and revising, drafting and editing, outlining and rethinking. The writing process is a series of loops, not a mechanical sequence from note cards to outline to finished draft. Frequently in the CWC our task is helping the student to back off from closure on a text (evident, for example, when a student asks for a paper to be proofread, wanting us simply to check for spelling and grammar errors) and reconsider the paper from a larger perspective: to recircle the paper in a new way.

• **Improving writing is improving reading.** When we work with students and their papers, we are helping them read what they have written. When they can free themselves from their initial "writer-based" orientation, it is easier for them to see how to make worthwhile revisions. You might keep in mind this distinction between "writer-based prose" and "reader-based prose" (the terminology comes from the researcher Linda Flower). Writer-based prose is written to fulfill the needs of the writer. Good first draft writing is often exploratory, egotistic, incomplete, underdeveloped, and lacking in transitions. Reader-based prose is written to fulfill the needs of the reader: to get something, anything, down on paper; and to discover what it is he or she wants to say. The good writers are those who can transform their writer-based prose into reader-based prose, writing that fulfills the needs of an audience. Reader-based prose stresses communication, completeness, development, clarity, effective transitions, etc.

• **Where are we and what are we doing?** Make certain you and the student understand the assignment. What has the teacher asked the student to do? The answer to that one question often drives everything that occurs in a conference. All student texts are, from the instructor's perspective, intended for a specific context. We can't be of much assistance to the student if we can't find out what are the instructor's explicit instructions. If the student does not know, then probably a search for that information (a call to the instructor?) becomes the first order of business.

"By writing much, one learns to write well." --Robert Southey

• **Do not confuse rewriting with error-hunting.** *It is not necessary for you to be an authority in spotting all errors.* Even college professors frequently miss dangling participles, and you will discover that what is a serious error to one instructor is inconsequential to another. Both beauty and errors are in the eyes of the beholder.

• **The secret to improvement is good revising.** We can do a real disservice by placing too much emphasis on the editing of surface errors (spelling, punctuation, etc), especially when we are working with early versions of a paper. Students often need to rethink the fundamental issues in a paper, a task few eagerly seek. For the majority of papers, we could "correct" all the grammatical and mechanical errors and the piece of writing would still not substantially improve. We all need to practice reading our papers as revisers, not editors. This does not mean, however, that we ignore editing errors. Even in papers when you are addressing fundamental issues in the development or organization of a paper, it may also be useful to help the student identify significant problems with sentence structure, word usage, punctuation, etc. Every paper offers many doors for entering into a discussion of a text. It will often occur that we can get to the big issues most effectively by beginning with a small issue and then following where that path may lead us.

• **When dealing with errors, look for patterns.** If you do find an "error" pattern (recurrent instances in spelling, grammar, sentence structure, etc. where the students' texts do not conform to the conventions of Standard English), seek the cause of the error. One approach is to ask students if they know why they wrote the passage that way. Was there a language rule they were instinctively following? You should keep in mind that there is usually a logic to students' writing errors: there will be reasons why students do what they do. If students can discover why they make their errors, it increases the likelihood of those errors not reappearing in the future.

• **Deal with errors and writing problems in terms of meaning, not grammar rules.** We can address most writing issues by seeking to clarify the meaning of the sentences or to strengthen the impact of the writing on the potential reader. When writers write, they should concentrate on meaning: "Am I saying what I want to say as completely and clearly as I can say it?" A consultant's focus on meaning will increase the likelihood that the writer can use this knowledge in the future. Following this guideline is not always possible or practical, but working in this direction can boost your success as a consultant.

• **Encourage students to solve their own problems.** We should remember that many failed papers are the failures of performance, not intention. The student often knows, just as we do, that the paper has not worked. A major purpose of the conference is to learn what the student thinks about the paper you have read. Thousands of writing conferences languish because the teacher or consultant never discovers how the student perceives the student's own text.

• **Enable the writer to set the conference's agenda.** Here we come to a fundamental tension because, as writing consultants, we are often working in two opposite directions. One fundamental rule of conferencing is to guide a student in recognizing and addressing the most significant issues for improving a paper. Simultaneously, we must allow the student to determine the priorities for any further revisions. After all, it is the student's paper, not the consultant's. These two contradictory forces must be renegotiated and resolved with each new conference.

"There is no one right way. Each of us finds a way that works for him. But there is a wrong way. The wrong way is to finish your writing day with no more words on paper than when you began.

Writers write." --Robert B. Parker

• **A consultant's task is clarifying options.** Your task in the conference is not to tell the writer what to do but to enable the writer to see why the writing is not affecting you, the reader, in the desired ways. You help the writer see the available options, but let the writer make the decisions. What counts is the student writer learning to make writing decisions. Sometimes writers make bad decisions. And that can be okay; we can learn as much from failures as from successes. Don't get mad or frustrated or depressed because a writer chooses the "less good" option.

• **Good papers deserve demanding readers.** All drafts are imperfect and incomplete. If you read the paper through one time and it sounds perfect, then read it again. Attack the text, be relentless in searching for possible weaknesses. Be particularly aware of gaps; even the best papers frequently suffer from the sins of omission, avoiding tough issues, skirting around topics deserving analysis. Push yourself to ask questions. Even if you don't uncover any significant problems, you can demonstrate that you took the paper seriously and you thought long and hard about the text's meaning. Good papers deserve demanding readers.

• **This is a people operation.** Our primary purpose is to serve and support fellow students, to help make their college experience more interesting, more liberalizing, more rewarding. In some instances this service will be rendered as we talk with them about their composition assignments, but in many instances the most pressing issues lie beneath or beyond the writing. We are not a professional counseling agency, but we can be good listeners and demonstrate a willingness to respond to each student's needs.

• **Our goal is to create better writers.** In the Writing Center, our object is, to quote Stephen North, "to make sure that writers, and not necessarily their texts, are what gets changed by instruction. In axiom form it goes like this: Our job is to produce better writers, not better writing." This does not mean that we are content with students producing error-ridden texts, but it is a reminder that our primary focus should be on the person. The people who come to the Writing Center are more important than their assignments or the papers they are writing.

• **Eschew Obfuscation.**

"Every morning between 9 and 12 I go to my room and sit before a piece of paper. Many times I just sit for three hours with no ideas coming to me. But I know one thing: If an idea does come between 9 and 12, I am there ready for it." --Flannery O'Connor



STAFFING THE WRITING CENTER

Professional Behavior and Common Courtesy

• **Respect and Confidentiality.** We treat all faculty, students, and Writing Center Consultants with professional respect. Such an approach requires the following considerations:

- We never talk about a student's writings or behavior outside of the Writing Center.
- We never talk about a student's writings or behavior while other people are in the CWC.

A student's composition is always treated with respect. We should never denigrate a student's English nor the ideas in the papers. Students deserve the same respect and right to privacy that lawyers and doctors give their clients.

• **Common Courtesy**

- When answering the phone, indicate the caller has reached the Writing Center and give your name so the caller knows who has answered the phone: "Writing Center, (give your name) speaking."
- Cordially welcome all people, even faculty and administrators, who come into the Writing Center. We have a responsibility to make everyone feel comfortable. Regardless of our private feelings, each visitor to the Writing Center must be treated in a warm, friendly manner.

• **No Smoking, Chewing, or Spitting in the CWC.** Nuff said.

The Log Book: Maintaining Conference Schedules

Tutoring sessions begin at 10 minutes after the hour and 30 minutes after the hour. Unless otherwise specified, sessions are scheduled for 20 minutes. When scheduling students in the log book, sign them up with a specific staff member at a specific hour. The one key issue is to record accurately the student's name. It can also be useful if you can identify the student's class and the instructor's name.

Please record all spontaneous, walk-in conferences. If you have an unscheduled conference with a student about a paper/assignment, please write in name/course/instructor information in the logbook. Also record all dorm conferences and other meetings with students that occur outside of the Writing Center. We need reasonably accurate numbers of how many students use the Writing Center; the log book is our primary source of information for that data. Please record all conferences. Keep in mind that you can earn work-study pay or WC Scholarship credit for any hours giving conferences, regardless of location.

"How do I know what I think until I see what I say?" –E. M. Forster

When On Duty

• **Beaver, Frog, and Sloth Consultants.** Our goal is to always have a minimum of two consultants on duty. The Beaver and Frog designations indicate some distinctions in respective job responsibilities. If

staff members on duty want to work out a different arrangement, that's fine; otherwise, this split in responsibilities will be the "default" setting.

- **The Beaver Consultant:** If not already in a conference, the Beaver's #1 job is to greet students who come into the Writing Center. The Beaver is responsible for staying in the reception area (either at the main desk or in the immediate vicinity) to spot students and faculty who may be coming to the Writing Center seeking assistance. The Beaver automatically handles walk-in conferences. Beavers are also responsible for cutting down any aspens growing on campus and building dams to protect the Writing Center from floods.
- **The Frog Consultant:** The primary responsibilities for the Frog include taking care of the coffee/tea business, straightening up the Writing Center when it needs house cleaning, helping students with the computers, filling the Beaver's greeting functions when the Beaver is conducting a conference, and thwarting any terrorist attacks launched in the CWC during that shift.
- **The Sloth Consultant:** When a third consultant is scheduled, the primary responsibility is assisting the Beaver or Frog Consultants with their duties. If a Sloth is a first-year member of the staff, an important responsibility during this hour is entering information from orchid forms into the database.

To the best of the Supreme Scheduler's abilities, most staff members should have a relatively even split between their Beaver, Frog, and Sloth Hours. It is always expected that consultants will help each other. If the Frog Consultant is in a conference and the coffee needs to be made, there should be no question about the Beaver volunteering to create a new caffeine concoction.

Key Point: The staff on duty should always know which consultant will handle students who unexpectedly appear seeking help. Our success depends on students feeling comfortable and welcome when they enter this space, seeking assistance.

• **Coming, Leaving, & Missing Work**

- **Be on time.** "On time" is defined as "on the hour" when you are reporting for work. If you can arrive a few minutes early, that can make it much easier for retiring staff who may have other commitments that begin on the hour. When your time is up, please try to remain in the Writing Center until your "relief" arrives.
- **Missing Work.** If you can't staff the Writing Center during your hours, it is your responsibility to find a replacement. If you know you are going to miss work, make sure that your name is crossed off the schedule for that time slot; write in your replacement's names whenever possible.
- **Initialing completed work.** when you have finished your daily stint, place initials in boxes (on log sheets) indicating which half-hour segments you worked. You only receive credit for the hours initialized in the log book.
- **Missing work.** If you are scheduled to work in the Writing Center but you do not show up for your shift and you did not notify the staff or find a replacement worker, The staff working during that shift is responsible for sending an e-mail message to the CWC Director indicating the name of the consultant and the hour(s) missed. Recurrent failure to come to work on time will result in dismissal from the staff.

▫ **Conferences on your own time.** If you meet with a student (friend, roommate, lover, R.A., fellow classmate, etc.), regardless of the time or place, please record the conference (including name of student/course/instructor) in the logbook so you receive credit for the time. You will get paid (either work-study or scholarship credit) for any conference entered in the logbook accompanied by a completed conference form.

• Recording Work Hours

▫ Staff Members on Work-Study: Pink Time Sheets

- Blank pink time sheets are in the top drawer of the white filing cabinet.
- Fill in the information at the top. At the bottom under "Department" write "Writing Center" and sign your name under "Employee's Signature." Please write in the Writing Center work-study account number: 1-627-5600.
- Keep track of your hours by recording under the appropriate days the beginning and ending times you worked. Also record "am" or "pm" with the times so the Business Office secretary will accept the pink sheets without asking that they be redone.
- At the end of the month, add up your hours and record them under "Total Hours Worked."
- To ensure payment, place completed--and signed--pink sheet in mailbox of staff member responsible for collecting sheets, obtaining Director's signature, and delivering form to Business Office.
- Before pink sheets are submitted to the business office, all your Consultant Conference summary forms for that month should be completed and turned in.

▫ Staff Members on Scholarship: Green Time Sheets

Scholarship staff members follow a procedure similar to work-study students; however, the green sheets for the scholarship recipients are kept in the Writing Center. Each month, those forms should be placed in mailbox of staff member responsible for keeping track of total scholarship hours. The Scholarship obligation for the year is 150 hours.

• **A Clean Well-Lighted Place.** Coe does have a janitorial staff and they come in the Writing Center on a daily basis, but most of the upkeep of the room is our responsibility. Help out by observing the following:

- Don't litter; if you see litter, pick it up and throw it away.
- If you take books or materials from book shelves, put them back when you are finished with them.
- Coffee/Tea/Hot Chocolate/Apple Cider Mugs: if you have your own mug, clean it after you are finished with it. In case you missed the last sentence, here it is again: when you are finished using your mug or glass, immediately clean it.
- Dirty mugs and cups will be confiscated and imprisoned by the Director. If he washes your dishes for you, you owe him a \$1 per item.
- Keep chairs and sofas relatively free of books and coats. Remember that we have a hall tree plus a coat rack. Use them.
- If you see a pile of dirty dishes, wash them—even if you are not the one who made the mess. Some times such small favors make life easier for everyone—while giving you an opportunity to feel self-righteous and superior to everyone else.

"I get up in the morning, that's one of the hard parts, drag myself over to the old typewriter and sit down--that's even harder--and then I tell the Lord, 'I ain't greedy, Lord, just give me the next 500 words.'" --Harry Crews

• **Free Drinks–But Not Unlimited Free Drinks.** Each time you are scheduled to work in the Writing Center, you are eligible for one free drink: coffee, tea, hot chocolate, hot cider, or whatever else is available. This benefit, however, does not equal unlimited free access. The following stipulations apply:

- You provide your own cup; if you use a Styrofoam cup from the dispenser, you owe 10 cents to the coffee fund.
- If you get drinks in the Writing Center at times when you are not working as a staff member, you are responsible for paying for your drinks—just like everyone else. If you consume drinks on a frequent and regular basis, you might consider paying by the month—which entitles you to unlimited access (though you still pay for any cups that are used).
- Students in the Writing Center for a conference are eligible for one free drink; they do not have to pay for the cup.

• **Opening and Closing Writing Center**

□ **Opening the Writing Center in the Morning**

- All opening tasks should be shared equally by Beaver, Frog, and Sloth consultants.
- Make sure that computers, printers, and photocopier are on and ready for service.
- Make coffee and prepare hot water for tea, hot chocolate, etc. The Bunn machine should remain on at all times so it won't take twenty minutes to heat up. If the machine isn't on, the switch is in the back--just wait for the green light to come on. After brewing one pot of coffee, wait on green light before starting next pot. When the coffee is finished brewing, pour the dark brown liquid into the proper carafe. When not pouring fresh water into the top of machine, keep lid over strainer so hot water in the reservoir does not evaporate.
- Be sure the hot water dispenser reservoir does not go dry; a reservoir empty of water could result in a burned out motor.
- Straighten up Writing Center area. Pick up trash off floor, put papers away, hang coats up, make sure the place looks appealing and reasonably clean.
- Make sure cup “dispenser,” creamers, sugar, tea, hot chocolate, etc. are filled and ready for another big day in the CWC. Notify the Director (or the appropriate lackey) of any shortages.

“As we acquire more knowledge, things do not become more comprehensible, but more mysterious.” --Will Durant

□ **Closing the Writing Center in the Evening**

- Turn off the coffee equipment. Clean coffee filter. Discard leftover coffee from silver carafes. When cleaning carafes, pump water through dispenser to rinse inside of pump. Straighten up the coffee area and either wash or confiscate dirty mugs.
- When closing up for the evening, please make sure that computers are ready for restarting in the morning. Computers and printers can be left running through the night; they do not need to be turned off.
- Straighten up the Writing Center; pick up stuff off floor; straighten books on shelves; create a semblance of order. Turn off lights and lock doors.

☞ If you are leaving for the night and there are still people working in the Writing Center, make sure that all of the above are completed or someone swears to assume responsibility for any unfinished closing. The evening staff members are responsible for ensuring that the Writing Center is closed properly.

• **The Keys to the Writing Center.** Those who open the Writing Center are eligible for receiving a key in exchange for a \$10 deposit; the money is returned when you return your key. Keep in mind that with the acceptance of a key comes responsibility for (1) never losing the key and (2) remaining remarkably cooperative in allowing other consultants to use the key for entering the Writing Center on weekends and other odd hours. Anyone needing entrance to the Writing Center can always call upon Security (8888).

"Inspiration usually comes during work, rather than before it." --Madeleine L'Engle

Computers

No food or drink on computer tables or near computers. Anyone spilling food or drink on computers will immediately experience a significant increase in tuition fees for the year. Treat the computers with gentle affection. Without these computers and printers we would be severely crippled. Concerning priorities for computer usage, we will adhere to the following guidelines:

- Top priority is given to students using computers for writing papers.
- When working during their scheduled Writing Center hours, staff members should yield computers to Coe students who need to use computers for writing or printing papers.
- If a student wishes to use a computer simply for printing a paper, the staff should try to accommodate the request if possible.
- Using computers for writing or printing papers takes priority over e-mail, surfing the net, or other computer activities.
- Because a laser printer is expensive to maintain (the replacement toner cartridges cost us about \$400 per year), print commands should be kept to a minimum. Maximum of 50 pages per student per day (one-time exception can be made for final copies of major writing projects, such as theses). No one should use the printer to make multiple copies; use photocopiers if multiple copies are needed.
- Computers should not be used for video games during the Writing Center's open hours (alas, one of the Director's petty pet peeves; if you are determined to play Minesweeper or Solitaire

during your shift, it's best to keep a guard posted to warn of any unexpected inspection). It is essential that we maintain the appearance of a professional organization. It's also the case that during our working hours there are always plenty of jobs to be completed. Please play your video games elsewhere or during hours when the Writing Center is not officially open.

If you have problems with computer, laser printer, shortage of paper, etc., please notify the Director via e-mail of any significant computer problems.

"Good writing is a kind of skating which carries off the performer where he would not go."
--Ralph Waldo Emerson

Staff Meetings

Unless the consultant has permission from the Director for being absent, each staff member is required to attend all full-staff meetings, which are typically schedule for Monday evenings in Gage Union, 5:45-6:45. Attending staff requirements is a fundamental requirement for working in the Writing Center; failure to attend is sufficient grounds for dismissal from the staff. If you are not there, it is your responsibility to notify Bob prior to the meeting time, and it is also your responsibility to learn what (if anything) happened. Individuals who have class conflicts or legitimate reasons for missing staff meetings are excused.

"A writer is not someone who expresses his thoughts, his passion or his imagination in sentences but someone who thinks sentences. A Sentence-Thinker." –Roland Barthes

Procedures for Dismissal

We will follow the guidelines provided by Financial Aid Office for work-study employees. One additional requirement is that all students working in the Writing Center must maintain a minimum of a 3.0 CUM GPA. As for the dismissal procedure, college policy requires that you receive two written reprimands prior to final dismissal. The Writing Center Director guarantees that there will be at least a two-minute interval between the first and second reprimand.

*"All good writing is **swimming under water** and holding your breath."* --F. Scott Fitzgerald

Consultant Conference Form (The Orchid Form)

Since the summer of '88, we have been keeping our records of tutoring sessions on a database. We will continue to use a paper form for all conference summaries, followed by a timely transfer of the information to the database. Once the information is typed into the database, the forms will be stored in a filing cabinet in the Writing Center Library.

You should fill out one form per conference, including dorm sessions. Write full, detailed summaries of your conferences. Write legibly. Please do conferences forms immediately after the conference--or as soon as possible if immediate completion is impossible. The longer you wait, the more difficult it is to provide accurate information; a substantial delay defeats the purpose for using such a recording procedure.

Once a form is completed, it should be stored out of sight. Never leave the forms on a table or any place where the forms can be read by Writing Center visitors. We should keep information and

observations about conferences as confidential and protected as possible, minimizing the likelihood that students will feel like they are being unjustly evaluated by our staff.

Important Note: These completed forms can be reviewed by any consultant as well as the student and instructor. The forms are sometimes used for topics papers or conferences. Because of the many different people who could have access to these forms, don't write any snide or derogatory comments that you would not want the student or instructor to read. Be honest in your comments but don't forget the values of occasional discretion.

We maintain the conference data for several reasons:

- It is important for us to take a few minutes after a conference and reconsider what happened in the session, what techniques we used (or failed to use), and what we learned from the session. The record-keeping procedure invites us to think further about what we are doing. Please write comments that provide useful description and analysis.
- We have some students who will visit the Writing Center on a regular basis. The database enables us to learn what has been covered in previous conferences and effect our assistance is having.
- On occasion faculty members want to know what was covered in a tutoring session; the maintenance of up-to-date, properly maintained records could substantially enhance the faculty's respect for our work.
- One task of the Writing Center is to learn more about how tutoring works and how students learn to improve their writing. Any attempt to explore these issues must have a reliable record of what occurs within our own "friendly confines." We have given many presentations at professional conferences and have had several articles published that depended on information gathered from the database. Despite its imperfections, the database has provided us with invaluable insights into our operation and enabled us to develop a national reputation as one of the premier college writing centers. Continued usage and development of the database is one of our best tools for continuing to improve our writing program.

"Get black on white." --Guy de Maupassant

Surviving the Year

The Writing Center is open 77 hours per week. While the Director will periodically be in Peterson 154, the Writing Center is typically administered by the undergraduate staff. This means that staff members are responsible for virtually everything that goes on. It is your task to make the place work smoothly and efficiently. Everyone needs to look for ways to help each other out. Quoting Alan Hiebert, a Writing Center consultant from a previous century, "Just common sense and cheerfulness go a long way."

"One of the disadvantages of wine is that it makes a man mistake words for thoughts."
 –Samuel Johnson

The Writing Center is a Nuclear Weapon Free Zone

Since the Writing Center was founded in 1986, it has always been a nuclear-free zone. Neither students, faculty, administrators, alumni, nor visitors are authorized to bring nuclear weapons into the Writing

Center. Should individuals be caught with nuclear weapons in their possession, they will be immediately shooed off Writing Center property.

TWENTY GUIDELINES FOR CONFERENCING

1. **Rapport.** Establish and maintain rapport with student. Try to help the student feel relaxed and comfortable. If consulting with someone you don't know, take a minute to find out something about the individual. It often helps to talk about the subject with the student before jumping into the paper. You can usually be more helpful if you discover what the writer wants to say before you read the paper.
2. **Understand Assignment.** Make sure the student and you both understand the assignment. Ask for written directions if any exist. Clarify such issues as the paper's purpose, the choice of subjects, the preferred length, the audience, the criteria for evaluation, the format guidelines. If important issues are not clear, perhaps you or the student should contact the instructor for clarification on these guidelines.
3. **See the Person; Hear the Person.** Listen to the people seeking assistance. Don't feel you must immediately jump to the text. Take your time at the beginning of the conferences to talk with the students. Offer some coffee or hot chocolate. Find out what they are studying and how they like their classes. Learn some things about their subjects and how they feel about these topics. Don't waste the student's time, but do demonstrate that you are interested in this person, that you see this person.
4. **Don't Rush.** Most conferences last 15-20 minutes, but they can last an hour or more. Regardless of your other commitments, take the time necessary to do a good job. If your hour is up, arrange for the student to meet with another consultant. Provide the necessary introductions and background.
5. **Ask Questions.** You don't have to be the expert. Don't be afraid to use your lack of knowledge as a strength. Ignorance allows you to ask real questions. Don't hesitate to seek help from another staff member. Sometimes conferences which involve everyone in the CWC are the most fun and effective.
6. **The Dumb Reader.** It's okay to be the dumb reader. Dumb readers are invaluable because they don't fill in the gaps for the writer. When you encounter a gap, find out what is missing. Maybe the gap needs filling, maybe not, but at least the writer will know that for one reader, there was an absence present at that moment in the text. Perhaps the major task of the writing center consultant is to identify gaps in the paper and help the writer determine which ones need filling. Remember: All papers are incomplete.
7. **The Suggester.** A Writing Consultant acts as a suggester: a monitor, stimulator, guide, reference source, friend. It is not your job to tell the student what to do with the paper. You can certainly make suggestions, but it's best if the selection of a final solution comes from a student, not from us. When suggestions are offered, try to explain why you suggested what you did. And it's most helpful to give more than one option for a problem so the writer makes the final choices.
8. **The Researcher.** Approach a writing conference as a research exercise--an opportunity to learn more about writing or about the topic at hand. You are a student of the writing process. Your first task is not to solve any problems. Your first task is to understand. What is the history of this paper? How did the paper get started? What revising has already occurred? What is the writer trying to accomplish? How

does this draft match with the writer's vision? How does this paper work? How is it organized? What are the transitions like? What patterns do you see in the writing? [Questions again.]

9. **Playing movies of the mind.** According to author and teacher Peter Elbow, the reader in a writing conference provides the writer with a recording (a “movie”) of impressions while reading the paper. Indicate passages that worked for you and explain why they worked. Identify confusing passages and attempt to explain why you were confused. Encourage the student to take notes during the discussion-- or you can become a model, jotting down notes as you discuss your responses to the manuscript.

10. **Be aware of your body language.** Think about your body language and the physical arrangement of the tutoring session. Be aware of how bodies are situated. Are you and the student working on the same plane? Who holds the pen? Who is closer to the paper? Who is leaning forward? How does a conference on the sofa compare with a conference at a table?

11. **Shut up and listen.** Don't feel you must do all the talking. In most instances, the more talking the student-writer does, the more successful the conference. Take your time, ask questions, show interest in the ideas of the paper, search for ways to enable the student-writers to tell you what they want to do with the paper. When working with ESL students, give them time to respond. Silence is not a sin.

12. **Concentrate on higher-order concerns.** Help the student tackle major issues first. Try to adhere to the following hierarchy of questions and concerns:

- (1) What is the assignment and does the writing meet the assignment?
- (2) Does this writing make sense? Where are the passages you do not understand? Where does the writing need better examples and stronger evidence? How does this writing need to be filled out or condensed?
- (3) How is the organization? Do the parts of the paper fit together? Are the parts tied together by convincing and understandable transitions?
- (4) Does the writing have problems with sentence structure, punctuation, grammar, usage, style?

13. **Four rules of thumb when working with editing issues** (level 4 concern from previous list):

- ☞ If possible, discuss any problems with sentence structure, spelling, punctuation, etc. after the major issues in the other three levels have been covered.
- ☞ When dealing with problems in level 4, concentrate first on those items where there is a pattern or a repetition in errors.
- ☞ When dealing with problems in level 4, deal with the difficulties in terms of meaning whenever possible.
- ☞ When you see a paper "at the last minute," you often have no choice but to deal with mechanical, grammatical issues. You may wish to point out some larger problems, but in these cases indicate the time factor necessitates only discussion of easily correctable items.

14. **Do not overload the student with suggestions.** Most writers can only work with 2-3 major issues in any one stage of revision. If you are giving multiple suggestions, encourage the student to take notes.

15. **Do not write on a student's paper.** If any revisions are made on the student's paper, they must be made by the student. It is okay for a consultant to make small marginal notes in pencil, reminders of spots to discuss later, but you should never make any corrections, additions, or deletions on a student's text. It is permissible for you to serve as a note taker for the student, writing down ideas that arise during the conference (though, ideally, it is more valuable for the students if they become the note takers, listing ideas or improvements that can be integrated into their texts).

16. **Do not criticize faculty teaching.** While we will encounter many lousy assignments and inadequate or incomplete responses by instructors to student papers, the Writing Center staff must maintain a professional courtesy in dealing with these instances. We do not denigrate a faculty member's assignment, commentary, grades, etc. It is our job to help the students understand the rhetorical situation they find themselves in. It is not our job to change that situation or turn the student against the instructor. If you find practices or attitudes you dislike, complain to the Director. He's a coward and probably won't do anything, but getting it off your chest may make you feel better. Encourage students to clarify things with the professor. Opening channels of communication can have surprising benefits.

17. **Do not grade a paper.** Avoid evaluative comments on an entire paper, comments which students inevitably translate into grades. Even vague niceties such as "this is a really good paper" can profoundly mislead students in their expectations and understanding their own work. When making a positive comment about a paper, direct the observation to a specific part of the paper or the student's writing process. One other procedure for affirming a student's work is to cast your remarks in terms of how you respond as a reader: talk about your feelings and not necessarily claim that you have identified qualities inherent in the writing.

[Bob's personal addendum: When students ask about what grade "I think" a paper would receive, I often tell them that they will never receive a grade on a paper. What is graded is the transaction that occurred between the reader and the paper. Each instructor will have a unique response, and thus the same paper will be graded differently by different instructors. College faculty are queer ducks and they all have different assumptions, different expectations, different ways of reading, different ideas about right and wrong. Also, each course provides a unique context for the reading of a paper: that context profoundly affects the grade a paper can receive. As outsiders, we never fully understand that context.]

18. **Ask questions, ask questions, ask questions.** Ask questions before you start reading the paper, ask questions while reading the paper, ask questions when you have finished with the paper. Ask questions about the writing process, about the research, about the ideas, etc. Demonstrate that you are interested in the content and meat of the paper.

19. **No student should leave empty-handed.** *Never simply read a paper, hand it back, and say, "Nice job, I don't see any problems."* If you can't find anything to talk about, then you didn't *read* the paper. You aren't required to find problems in all papers, but you are required to take students' writing and ideas seriously and talk with them about the text, the subtext, and the context. Any paper raises hundreds of issues. Your task is to get the student to thinking further about one or two of those issues.

20. **Seek Follow-up.** Whenever possible, try to reschedule students for return visits to the Writing Center. Or ask them to let you know how the paper turned out (and how well it was received by the teacher). Return visits are an important means for us to discover how effective our consulting really is. Let the students know that you care about their work.

“Writing is easy. All you have to do is cross out the wrong words.” --Mark Twain

Special Conference Situations

• **ESL Conferences.** Some new staff members enter the Writing Center with some trepidation about how to conduct conferences with students who are not native-English speakers. That fear often derives from a consultant's concern of not being able to understand the student's speech, or the student writer will not understand the consultant's speech. While there will often be moments of awkwardness and misunderstanding in these conferences, nearly all consultants will discover (often before the end of the first meeting) that ESL conferences are one of the most gratifying aspects of working in the Writing Center. These conferences are so enjoyable because the students are eager to learn English and relish the opportunity to talk with you. Just keep in mind that you are not responsible for solving all the student's problems with English. All you need to do is help with one or two elements in their writing or speech. Often a critical benefit of the conference is simply the conversation, giving the student a chance to practice speaking and listening in English. But the greatest joy from these conferences is simply the opportunity to meet someone from a foreign country, to learn something about this person's culture and perspective on the world, to acquire a new friend.

• **Required Conferences.** It might surprise new staff members to discover that in the assessments of conferences on the orchid forms, there has historically been virtually no distinction between the evaluations of required conferences and of conferences freely chosen by the student writer. You don't want to enter into a required conference expecting it to be non-productive, simply because it is "required." Keep in mind that most writing conferences with faculty are required. Most students are not inclined to voluntarily seek assistance; however, they don't necessarily resist assistance when they are required to seek it. Most of education in college is driven by requirements: requirements to attend class, to submit papers, to take exams, etc. The requirement to have a conference on a paper is for most students not a particularly attractive aspect of the writing process, but it is not something that many students are determined to undermine. Presented with an opportunity to get some assistance with a writing assignment, most will use the opportunity.

• **Reading Conferences.** In many respects reading is more important than writing in the Writing Center. Staff members are hired to demonstrate to other students various ways to read texts. In the majority of instances, these texts are student-written and we are helping students learn how to read and analyze their own language. But in some instances we have conferences where we are helping students read other class assignments. The key point in these sessions is to help students consider different techniques for opening up a text and making sense of it. One advantage of the reading conference in the Writing Center is the opportunity to talk about the reading assignment with someone else. The more talking we can get the students to do, the more likely they will comprehend the main points in the text, generate some new ideas about the text, and remember what the text was about.

• **Editing Conferences.** As was pointed out elsewhere in the Manual, if someone asks for an editing conference, that is what we should provide. In many instances the conferences may involve into an examination of higher-order concerns, but it's okay to start with editing. Every text offers thousands of doors for entrance; starting with commas is a perfectly acceptable opening. It is also important to keep in mind that the production of cleanly edited products is important; the presence or absence of editing errors can strongly affect a manuscript's grade. Just as importantly, the process of learning how to edit their own papers can help students learn how to see and understand their own writing. Taking away the errors and excess words and faulty constructions, it is like a pruning operation, bringing out the beauty in the text. We can't make the corrections for the students. But we can help them learn to see what is there, and how to make their "there" more powerfully present.

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A QUARRY OF QUESTIONS TO ASK STUDENTS ABOUT THEIR PAPERS

--What do you think is the main point of your paper? What are you trying to improve? If you could summarize your thesis in one or two sentences, what would you say?

--What should I learn from this paper? What are you telling me that I probably didn't know? Is there any place in the paper where you were hoping to surprise me or shock me?

--What is the purpose of this paper? What should this paper do for a reader (other than fulfilling the assignment for the class)? Is it supposed to be informative? Argumentative? Persuasive? Descriptive?

--How did you choose this particular subject? How did this paper develop? Did you have any trouble getting started?

--How many drafts of this paper have you written? What changes have you made between the first version and the draft I'm reading?

--Where are the places in this paper that you think the writing works best?

--Where are the places in the paper that you have questions about or you feel uneasy?

--Did you have your thesis and organization laid out before you started writing? Has your thinking concerning this subject changed since you started working on the paper? Have you changed your arguments in any way while writing?

--How do you think your instructor will respond to this paper? Have you done previous papers for this instructor? What kind of responses have you received?

--What did your instructor say about the assignment? Did the instructor say anything about the knowledge and background of the intended audience? Should this paper be understandable to a dumb reader?

--Where is this paper going? What do you intend to do when you revise it?

--Do you feel the paper has any gaps? Are there places where you feel you are jumping over a problem or not dealing sufficiently with the subject?

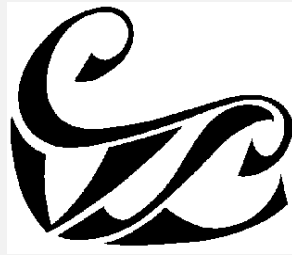
--How does this paper compare with previous papers you've done for this class? For other classes?

--If you could make one significant change in this paper right now, what would it be?

A final reminder: Your questions don't have to focus on the text; ask questions about the topic. Find out what else the writer knows about the subject that did not get into the paper. It frequently happens that simply by talking about the topic with the author and seeking out other ideas/information available to the writer, material will be brought out that can work in a paper. Student writers tend to write about the obvious and the general, leaving out the most interesting ideas and illustrations.

**THE
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