

# WRITING @ CENTER

PUBLICATION OF THE GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY WRITING CENTER AND WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM PROGRAM

wac.gmu.edu

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## NEWS FROM THE CENTER

During the Fall 2006 semester to date, the Writing Center saw a total of

- ✍ 977 clients
- ✍ 2543 sessions.
- ✍ 48 workshop attendees

Peer tutor and Writing Fellow **Alex Antram** (pictured lower right) was a Marshall Scholarship finalist for the D.C. region. Also pictured is Rachael Lyon, a designated personal statement tutor.

### WAC Assistant Director Named

In support of our nationally ranked program, Provost Stearns provided funding for faculty release time for a program assistant director. **Sue Durham** (see p. 6) assumed this role in fall 2006. She will act as interim WAC director in the spring while director Terry Zawacki is on research leave. The recognition and praise our WAC program has garnered could not have happened without the efforts of faculty across the university. The WAC committee greatly appreciates your efforts, and looks forward to continued cooperation and success. (The interim writing center director for spring will be **Anna Habib** [p. 2]).

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## ILLNESS NARRATIVE ASSIGNMENT DEEPENS UNDERSTANDING AND STRENGTHENS WRITING SKILLS

by Pamela Cangelosi, Nursing

Based on her 2006 WAC Conference presentation at Clemson University

In today's fast-paced and content-laden educational environment, it is essential to identify teaching strategies that assist students in understanding essential information and its application to their future careers. One way to accomplish this is to integrate teaching strategies that reinforce the vital content of the course and also provide opportunities for student growth beyond the objectives of the course. Important for all disciplines, integrated teaching is critical in the health sciences where lack of knowledge can mean the difference between life and death. In a pathophysiology course, nursing students in an accelerated one year program wrote an *illness narrative* that helped them learn disease concepts and understand how pathophysiological processes affect all aspects of a person's life. An illness narrative differs from a case study in that a case study focuses on the medical facts and responses to treatment. The illness narrative, however, seeks to capture the individual's perspective of living with the

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## GIVING OUR STUDENTS A BOOST IN THE NATIONALLY COMPETITIVE SCHOLARSHIP AWARD PROCESS

by Deidre Moloney, Coordinator for Postgraduate Scholarships & Fellowships



The Postgraduate Fellowships and Scholarships program supports Mason's most accomplished students: those who have demonstrated exceptional academic achievement and excellent leadership skills, completed significant research projects, and developed a global perspective. Since the program was established in mid-2005, several Mason students have received major awards and recognition. One student was named a Truman Finalist, another was awarded a Fulbright, three received NSEP/ David Boren undergraduate scholarships. Other recipients obtained a Pickering award and a Virginia Governor's Fellowship. The application process encourages all students to clarify their academic and professional goals and to develop their written and oral presentation skills.

To assist scholarship applicants writing personal statements, my office has worked with the University Writing Center to provide specialized training for three graduate tutors who study the characteristics of successful personal statements and are then designated as "experts" in this area. In addition to working with students applying for nationally competitive fellowships, such as the Rhodes, Marshall, Fulbright, and Jack Kent Cook awards, the tutors also develop and present a series of workshops on writing personal statements. We're pleased to say that several writing center undergraduate peer tutors have applied for nationally competitive fellowships, including Alex Antram (pictured above), an Anthropology and Religious Studies Major, who received campus endorsements for both the Rhodes and Marshall scholarships.

The postgraduate fellowship and scholarships program website (<http://www.gmu.edu/student/fellowships>) offers comprehensive information for Mason students and

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## NEWS FROM THE CENTER

## WRITING CENTER PARTICIPATES IN FALL FOR THE BOOK FESTIVAL

## Meditating on Writing in the Writing Center

For a writer, peace of mind can be even more elusive than that perfect word or phrase. In an effort to help a peripatetic group of writers achieve a semblance of serenity, GMU associate professor of English Don Gallehr conducted a workshop in the Writing Center that emphasized simple meditation techniques—no saffron robes or incense required. Participants learned proper posture, breathing, and basic methods of focus that permitted them to let go of the thoughts careening through their heads. By session's end, the participants' minds were no longer "staggering around like drunken monkeys." Instead, they were eminently prepared to answer the ultimate Zen question for writers: "What does my writing want to become?"

- reported by Ed Davis

## Tutors Write Poems "On Demand"

Tutors wrote on-the-spot poem for festival goers at the "Poetry On Demand" booth. Poets used pre-poem questionnaires to compose poems, such as the haiku below. The tutors who participated are all in the MFA program for Creative Writing.

- Who is this poem for? **my husband**
- What is the occasion? **our anniversary**
- What special trait does this person have? **patience**

As water shapes rock  
So your patience alters me  
You, my long-time friend

- by Rachael Lyons, MFA

## Personal Statements

continued from page 1

faculty, including a list of fellowship, scholarship, and related opportunities. The writing center's personal statement workshops are open to all students, with dates advertised on the writing center website. Students writing personal statements for any kind of opportunity may want to make appointments with this year's personal statement tutors, *Wade Fletcher*, *Rachael Lyon*, and *Tara Williams*.

## Some Tips for Faculty on Writing Effective Letters of Recommendation

• Ask students to provide details on the fellowship and its selection criteria, a transcript, resume, and a summary of their qualifications and relevant course work and research. If you cannot strongly endorse their candidacy, please gently decline their request. Without enthusiastic and detailed letters of recommendation, they will not be seriously considered for a nationally competitive award.

• Highlight specific examples of a student's strengths. Discuss the student's research papers or projects, contributions to class discussions, study abroad or internship experiences, and relevant professional or community involvement. You might evaluate their future graduate plans and/or project proposal. Simply summarizing the student's grades is less helpful than placing that in perspective: "Sarah Simpson is among the top five majors that I have taught in my decade as a faculty member at George Mason University."

• Effective letters for high achieving undergraduates range between one full page and two pages, on institutional letterhead.

For useful advice on helping students achieve their professional goals, see:

Schall, Joe. *Writing Personal Statements and Scholarship Application Essays: A Student Handbook*. Also by Schall: *Writing Recommendation Letters: A Faculty Handbook*. Eden Prairie, Mn: Outernet Publishing, 2005.

## MEET ANNA HABIB, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF THE UNIVERSITY WRITING CENTER



Anna was born in Beirut, Lebanon at the peak of the civil war and fled to the island of Cyprus with her family, where she grew up speaking English, Arabic, French and Greek. She graduated from George Mason University with her Master's of Fine Arts in Nonfiction writing. She is currently working on a book-in-progress, *A Block from Bliss Street*, about her experiences as a child of the Lebanese civil war. Her article "Cultural Awareness in the Tutoring Room" appeared in the November 2006 issue of *The Writing Lab Newsletter*.

Anna is a term assistant professor in the English Department; she will be serving as Interim Director of the Writing Center in Spring 2007 when Terry Zawacki is on research leave.

With Terry and three other Writing Center tutors, she is conducting research on non-native students' experiences with writing for the U.S. academy. They will be presenting their findings at the annual Conference on College Composition and Communication in March '07.

## WRITING @ CENTER

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## “WHAT DOES MY TEACHER WANT?”

### WHAT STUDENTS SAY ABOUT TEACHER EXPECTATIONS AND BEST PRACTICES

*“Sometimes professors vary so much in what they expect that getting that first paper back is a sigh of relief. It’s done, and I’ll have the feedback and I’ll learn whether I’m meeting the professor’s expectations and how to improve. I feel confident that I can do well when I write for my classes. It’s just getting those parameters set.”* --Robyn, a psychology major

How do students figure out what we teachers want in response to a writing assignment? For a student-focused chapter in their book *Engaged Writers & Dynamic Disciplines: Research on the Academic Writing Life*, Chris Thaiss and Terry Zawacki report their findings on this and other questions based on data collected from focus group interviews with undergraduate students from a range of majors and essays written by upper-division students from 22 majors as part of a portfolio process for proficiency credit for English 302. Here are some of those findings.

§§§

Most focus group students saw their professors as idiosyncratic in their expectations. One piece of advice they would give other students is to expect that even teachers in the same discipline will be different in what they want and how they grade.

Perhaps as a result of this perception, they placed most emphasis on feedback they received on the first paper of a course as an index of the teacher’s expectations.

§§§

When students can’t pick up cues from their teachers, they tend to fall back on prior experience and on stereotypes about what different disciplines expect.

*“I had a professor who didn’t have any writing assignments all semester and then we had a 9 page term paper to do. It was weird because once again you didn’t talk to him about writing in general, so you didn’t know how he wanted it to be written. I didn’t expect him to grade it like an English teacher. I just wanted him to see that I had found a lot of information and that I was able to get the word count. That’s what I expect from those who aren’t English teachers because it’s not their job*

*to critique my writing, it’s their job to critique what I learn.”* – Engineering student

Focus-group students tended to express discomfort and/or suspicion when teachers gave assignments or listed criteria they considered unconventional, like “Be aggressive towards the topic.”

*“I’d like to be original but I have no idea what my professor’s ideas of originality are.”* – Communication student

Yet a surprising number also said they tried to write in ways that wouldn’t bore their teachers and would somehow make their papers stand out.

§§§

Focus group and proficiency exam students stressed the importance of having a teacher point out their strengths as writers, as well as what needed to be improved.

*“It’s not just a good grade; you can get the highest grade. But for me what matters is that a professor mentions my strengths and then says what I should work on. Then the next time I write a paper I have a sense of my strengths and know that he’s going to be noticing those too and that increases my confidence.”* – Finance student

Students found it very helpful when teachers explained what constituted an “A” paper, a “B” paper, etc. either on the syllabus or the assignment itself; when teachers showed student examples and explained strong and weak points; when they included grading rubrics and discussed these in class.

§§§

Students who reported having lots of opportunities to write for different teachers and in many different courses were most confident about their writing

and what it means to be original.

*“The more you write, the more you see that all the rules you worried about following when you were just beginning sort of fade into the background and become the foundation from which you work. I guess that’s how you feel like you have more freedom to say what you want to say.”* – Psychology student

A teacher’s passion for her own work and/or the student’s academic project was a significant factor in engagement in the topic.

*“My professor had never heard of my topic and she was extremely interested in it, so I took the extra steps of doing more research. She wrote ‘Wow, you taught me so much’ on the paper, and I felt like I really could be an expert.”* – Health Recreation Tourism student

#### Some Implications for Teaching:

- Feedback to students on their writing, especially on the first paper, is crucial to student understanding of the discipline and the discourse.
- Students benefit from models, rubrics, and disciplinary examples of terms like “clear thesis” or “concise sentences.”
- When we ask for “original thinking” or “your own conclusions,” we should show students what this might mean—especially in writing based on the research of others.
- We should help students find and express their own passions for learning within the assignments we give. How will they benefit from doing our assignments?
- We should give students opportunities to write reflectively on their growth as writers.

by Terry Zawacki



# ADVICE ON BEST PRACTICES FOR USING TURNITIN.COM

by Star Muir, Senior Director of DoIT, Learning Support Services

George Mason University has purchased a site license for Turnitin, a service that processes student papers and provides an Originality Report indicating a percentage of matching material on the internet and several other databases. Our license currently includes only Plagiarism Prevention, not any other features of the Turnitin system. The best way to prevent plagiarism is to create assignments that engage students step by step in the researching and writing process, as Shelley Reid, Director of Composition, pointed out in the spring 2005 issue of *Writing@Center*. (See also “Defining and Avoiding Plagiarism: The WPA Statement on Best Practices at <http://wpacouncil.org/node/9>.) Used effectively, Turnitin will complement other teaching strategies and will also provide learning experiences about proper source attribution. Help resources at <http://www.turnitin.com> include Instructor Manuals, Quick-Start Guides, and instructional videos.

## Use Multiple Strategies for Reducing or Preventing Plagiarism

- Use new topics each semester, and consider using only very recent topics.
- Get a writing sample within the first week of class for future comparison.
- Time permitting, require papers to be completed in stages; perhaps a thesis first, then an outline, then a draft, then a final version.
- Place source or material constraints to reduce Internet temptation.
- Require a specific source, or an annotated bibliography (possibly due before the paper), or even copies of the first page of all references.

## Communicate Expectations Effectively

- Provide prior notice to students of intent to use TurnItIn in your syllabus. Experience at other institutions and common sense indicate that prior notice is an important part of maintaining trust in the classroom as well as an essential pre-requisite for deterring plagiarism. Consider adding a brief clause in your syllabus near the reference to the Honor Code: The instructor reserves the right to use TurnItIn, a plagiarism-detection service.
- Use some class time to review assignment expectations and proper citation style, particularly for assignments being turned in through Turnitin.
- Provide clear and useful online resources for reinforcing expectations for source attribution and use of quotations.
- Emphasize the value of doing your own work and proper source attribution.

## Maximizing Learning Experiences

- Allow students to view Originality Report scores, either once or multiple times. Instructors have the option to prevent students from seeing the reports, to allow students to see the report but only after a final submission, or to allow students to submit multiple times and then only have the last Originality Report available.
- Consider using consultation time to review originality reports with students individually.
- Use online tutorials or supplemental books to enhance student understanding.

## Maximize Clear Decision-Making

- High matching scores don't necessarily mean plagiarism. By default, TurnItIn's Originality Reports include all matching materials, even if quoted or in the bibliography. Select the links at the top of the originality report to recalculate the report: Exclude Quoted, or Exclude Bibliography.
- Exclude specific web sites if appropriate. If a student paper is legitimately listed on a web site, that URL can be excluded from the report by clicking the gray X to the right of the source.
- Computers can track 1s and 0s, but don't have judgment. While TurnItIn can help make direct comparisons to matching material, only faculty can make a final determination of plagiarism.

## Make Choices About TurnItIn Options

The Instructor's Manual has information about a variety of options which may be of interest or use to faculty, for example :

- Single paper submission vs. student online submission. Instructors can create a class and assignment and then submit selectively themselves or require every student to submit online.
- Student self-enrollment vs. Instructor batch-enrollment.
- Student paper database vs. Comparison to internet and external databases only. Under advanced options on assignment creation, faculty may exclude submission and comparison to the TurnItIn student paper database.
- Master Class (with subsections) vs. Single course section.

To learn more about all of these options, see TurnItIn Instructor Manuals, Quick-Start Guides, and instructional videos at <http://turnitin.com>.

### *Some Online Plagiarism Tutorials*

**Indiana University HTML quiz:**

<http://education.indiana.edu/~frick/plagiarism/item1.html>

**University of South Florida Flash tutorial and quiz:**

<http://www.cte.usf.edu/plagiarism/plag.html>

**Bedford/St. Martin's Plagiarism Tutorial:**

<http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/plagiarismtutorial/default.asp>

## Illness

*continued from page 1*

illness with all of its emotional, psychological, spiritual, and physical components.

### The Task

Each student was assigned to interview a person of her or his choosing who had a chronic disease, such as arthritis, diabetes, or heart failure. The purpose of the interview was to enhance the student's understanding of the individual's illness experience by encouraging the interviewee to recall in rich detail the lived experience of the illness in question. The person who was interviewed for this assignment could not be a client in the clinical practicum or a classmate. Consenting adult friends, relatives, or neighbors were the only individuals eligible to participate.

By eliminating the involvement of clients from the clinical sites, students were forced to extend their knowledge of nursing practice beyond the acute care realm and into the community where much of today's nursing is performed. This stipulation was also intended to help students recognize the challenges their chronically ill, acute care individuals face when discharged home.

Students were instructed not to include diagnostic tests and other medical data in the paper unless these topics were of concern to the interviewee. Focusing on narratives required the student to gather data from the individual, creating an understanding of what the illness experience means to that person.

Based on their interviews, the students were assigned the task of writing a paper in which a brief, one-paragraph definition of the disease was first stated. The majority of the paper was to consist of a description of how this disease has affected the interviewee's everyday living and perspective on life. The students were encouraged to write an assessment from the individual's viewpoint and to include the individual's own words whenever possible.

### The Outcomes

Knowledge of pathophysiological processes was an expected outcome of this exercise. While the focus of the paper was not on the description of the disease process, the students had to thoroughly research the disease in order to understand the individual's comments in the interview and to know how to prompt the

person to dialogue about how the disease was affecting everyday life.

Through the interviews, students learned the meaning of polypharmacy, medication interactions, and comorbidity. The writing of the narrative also helped the students better understand the influence of culture, the social and ethical implications of illness, and the role of scarce community resources in the management of chronic disease.

### Students' Feedback

One student noted when handing in her paper:

*I didn't really know these neighbors very well, but I knew the grandfather had diabetes. I interviewed the grandfather and his daughter who helped him a lot, and I found out so much about how their Hindu faith affects their healthcare practices and feelings about death. I never knew any of this before. I learned that I can help them, even if my beliefs are so very different.*

Unsolicited student comments also suggested that this assignment strengthened their writing skills. Limiting the length of the paper to three to four double-spaced pages challenged the students to compose succinct papers containing only the information vital to understanding how the chronic disease was impacting their interviewees' lives. Even references to their research course surfaced when deciding what information the individual said was "really qualitative data."

Some students obtained large quantities of information while some only gathered a scant amount. They learned the importance of skillful interviewing for assessment purposes, quality versus quantity of information, and professional reporting of essential information. Credit was given for proper grammar and spelling and correct documentation of any references was enforced.

As a student stated:

*It is hard to figure out what to include when you have so little space to write. I can go on and on when I write, but the page limit made me really think about what had to be included. This helped me look at my writing in clinical. You can't write everything, or you would be writing forever, and no one would take the time to read it. You have to determine what HAS to be included.*

### Some Essential Skills

At first, students were reluctant and bewildered to carry out a writing assignment in a science class, preferring to focus on information in the text, which they see as the authority on the disease.

As they talked with their respective individuals, however, they came to realize that it is not enough to know the pathological process of a disease. Through the writing of an illness narrative, students learned the essential skills of integrating and succinctly reporting information from the person living with the disease with the knowledge gained from their courses, and were brought to a deeper understanding of how a disease impacts a life.

## WAC Program Initiatives for 2006-2007

- The WAC committee is undertaking its fourth review of writing-intensive courses across the university.
- Interviews are being conducted with COS undergraduate coordinators with data leading to profiles on writing in scientific and computational majors.
- The program plans to expand its support of student excellence in writing awards. In spring 2006, the WAC writing excellence award was renamed "The Chris Thaiss Award for Excellence in Writing in the Disciplines" to recognize Chris's contribution as founder of our WAC program. (Chris has left Mason to lead a writing program at U. California, Davis.)
- Funds are available to pay stipends to faculty who participate in discipline-specific half-day workshops on teaching with writing. Funds are also available to support the production of on-line writing guides in the disciplines. See <http://wac.gmu.edu/guides/GMU%20guides.html>.
- The WAC website is scheduled to be redesigned in the spring, following the unveiling of a newly designed writing center site.

## SUE DURHAM, NURSING, ASSUMES WAC ASSISTANT DIRECTOR ROLE

Long-time member of the WAC Committee, Susan Durham has been teaching at George Mason University in the undergraduate nursing program since 1991. Her writing involvement at George Mason University began with her teaching and coordinating of the School of Nursing's writing-intensive course, NURS 465 in 1995.

Teaching writing has become one of Sue's passions, and she has NURS 465 to reflect her commitment to undergraduate writing and the WAC philosophy. As part of the course, she initiated the requirement of a best works portfolio. Sue has been instrumental in helping her college meet the State Council for Higher Education mandate for writing assessment by organizing an annual faculty panel within Nursing. This panel assesses three pieces of writing from a percentage of the students' best works portfolios used for a program evaluation of student writing competency and on university writing assessment.

Sue presented her portfolio successes at the Annual WAC Conference at Rice University in 2003. She has served on the Writing Across the



Curriculum (WAC) committee for the past six years and also serves on the University Writing Assessment Group, on the Critical Thinking Task Force, and on the School of Nursing's Program Evaluation Committee.

As faculty in Nursing, in addition to her work with the WI course, Sue teaches and coordinates the undergraduate senior nursing clinical practicum, teaches a course exploring concepts of health promotion and disease prevention across the lifespan and on the graduate level, and teaches the didactic practicum and seminar in nursing education. In 2005 she was awarded the University Teaching Excellence Award for the creative teaching methods she uses in her WI course and in other courses that she teaches.

Sue's publications include the book chapters, "Teaching students in a home-care setting," in *Community-based Nursing Curriculum: A Faculty Guide*, and "Community-based nursing practice in a home-care setting," in *Community-based Nursing Practice: Learning Through Students' Stories*. Forthcoming is the article "Implementing a New Faculty Workload Formula," in *Nursing Education Perspectives*.

### GRAMMAR CORNER

## S/HE SHOULD WATCH HER/HIS/THEIR WORDS: PRONOUNS, CONCISENESS, AND INCLUSIONARY LANGUAGE

by David Beach, *English, Interim Director of Composition*

In English, we strive for inclusionary language, but we also strive for conciseness. Using s/he, him/her, himself/herself over and over again becomes a tedious read, artificially increases word count, and lacks style. How do we get around this?

To be grammatically correct, writers need to consider three things when using pronouns:

- The pronoun must agree in number with its antecedent. We all tend to use a form of "they" when referring to a generic human: "Every student must include their revision summary on their paper in order to improve their grade." However, "student" is singular, and "their" is plural. A simple solution is to pluralize the antecedent: "Students must include their revision summaries on their papers in order to improve their grades." This is tricky with words such as everybody, any-

body, anyone, each, neither, nobody, or someone. These are singular nouns, and so pronoun referents must be singular as well: "Everybody should submit his or her essay on Wednesday" (NOT: their essay).

The National Council of Teachers of English, however, suggests in its 2002 "Guidelines for Gender-Fair Use of Language," that the plural pronoun can be used when indefinite referents are "clearly understood to be plural," e.g.: "Does everybody have their book?" The Council also suggests using a "singular they/their form," as in "Does each student have their book?" rather than "...his book." They note, however, that though this form has become more acceptable over time, assessment testers may deem it incorrect.

- The pronoun must agree in person with its antecedent. Here is a typical example of switching between third (the antecedent) and second person (the

pronoun): "When a person comes to class, you should have your homework ready." Grammatically, the "you" should be changed to "he" or "she" and "your" to "his" or "her"; however, a correct and more concise sentence would read: "When students come to class, they should have their homework ready." (Note the change in verb form from singular to plural, as well.)

- The pronoun referent must be clear. In the following example, it is unclear to which noun the pronoun refers: "Even though the painting fell off the wall, it was not damaged." Does "it" refer to "painting" or "wall"? To correct this, a pronoun should not be used: "Even though the painting fell off the wall, the painting was not damaged."

Reference:  
NCTE. (2002.) Guidelines for gender-fair use of language. Retrieved from <http://www.ncte.org/about/over/positions/category/lang/107647.htm>.