WRITING @ CENTER

NEWS FROM THE CENTER

During the academic year (to date), the Writing Center saw a total of

✐ **1460** clients in
✐ **2925** sessions.
✐ **26** workshop attendees

This semester, the writing center offered **Personal Statement Workshops** for students in the process of applying for graduate schools and postgraduate scholarships and fellowships. The workshops focused on strategies for tailoring personal statements towards their specific audiences. This often means finding ways for students to demonstrate how their goals dove-tail with those of the institution they are writing to while also writing in an individual, compelling voice. Tutors worked with **Deirdre Moloney**, Coordinator for Postgraduate Fellowships and Scholarships, to develop the workshop.

Four of our faculty will be presenting papers at the **8th International Conference on Writing Across the Curriculum** to be held at Clemson in May: *Jeanne Sorrell* and *Pamela Cangelosi*, Nursing; *Stanley Zoltek*, Mathematics; and *Terry Zawacki* and *Chris Thaiss*, English.

INSIDE . . .

In this ESL-focused issue, we feature faculty and tutor insights, opinions, and best practices related to teaching with writing in our linguistically diverse institution.

HOW CORRECT MUST YOUR ESL STUDENTS' WRITING BE? SOME FACULTY OPINIONS

reported by Scott Weaver, MFA TA / Tutor

As a TA who teaches intro comp and literature, I struggle with the question of how correct the writing of my non-native students needs to be. I was interested in hearing responses from faculty across the university to this and other related questions, including: How much attention do you give to the quality of the students' prose as compared to the quality of the ideas the writer is trying to express? Do written errors carry the same weight for you if the writer is an ESL student or do you grade all writers on the same scale? Do you think it is fair to grade all students – non-native speakers and native speakers – on the same scale? To hear what faculty have to say, the Writing Center sent these ESL-related questions to teachers in several departments. We were happy to hear that the faculty we queried generally agree that errors do "count," especially if they interfere with meaning; however, most say they are willing to spend time finding and pointing out patterns of errors in order to help students improve. Here's what they had to say:

Do you grade the writing of native and non-native students differently?

Tom C. Owens, Music and WAC committee member:
"I do mark problems in writing for ESL students, especially in drafts. I am less inclined to grade them down for grammar mistakes, etc., as long as their comprehension of the material they are writing about is strong. I will lower the grade of a student who does not fix errors that seem to indicate misunderstood material or poor thinking about the content."

Beth Schneider, SOM and WAC committee member:
"In SOM 301, we do not grade ESL work on a different scale. All of our assignments are designed so that 20% of the assignment is graded on grammar and mechanics and the other portion on format and content. Our reasoning is based on how the real world would examine a person's writing. We stress that you are judged on your writing and

TUTORING ESL WRITERS: WE DON'T EDIT; HERE'S WHAT WE DO

by Devon Ward-Thommes, MFA TA / Tutor

As a new teaching assistant and writing tutor trainee at the writing center, I had the opportunity to observe one of Eiman Hajabbasi's sessions with a non-native speaker from China. Eiman is one of two ESL specialists supported by the English Language Institute (ELI) to tutor in the writing center, reflecting their concern for the high proportion of non-native students seeking tutoring. In addition to tutoring, the ESL specialists help to train new tutors and develop resources for instruction. Efficient and informative, Eiman's session seemed like a template for how to tutor non-native speakers—and native English speakers as well. In fact, the methods Eiman employed could be useful for teaching with writing across the disciplines, as I will show in this article.

The student came in with an assignment from an English 101 class, prompting him to write an informative paper to an audience that knows nothing about his subject. He was supposed to use explanation and detail to define his terms and illustrate his experience growing up in a church-going family. After listening to him read the paper out loud,

NEWS FROM THE CENTER

WHAT'S YOUR ACCENT? FIND OUT ONLINE

by Lisa Busiahn, Linguistics TA / Tutor

What do a forty-three year old man from South Africa, a twenty-four-year old woman from Azerbaijan, and a seventy-three-year old man from Boston, Massachusetts have in common? They are all part of an ever-growing group of speakers from around the world whose voices have been recorded and posted on a website developed by lingustics professor Steven Weinberger.

The *Speech Accent Archive* contains speech samples from speakers of over one hundred of the world's languages, including English speakers from all over North America, Great Britain, and Australia. Visitors to the site can listen to the samples and see International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) transcriptions of each one.

The site can be especially useful to teachers of English as a Second Language, actors, and those doing research in Phonology and Second Language Acquisition.

And for the technologically savvy visitors who want to participate, there are even instructions detailing how to submit their own speech samples for inclusion in the archive.

However, the speech accent archive is not just a valuable vehicle for research; many of its visitors simply enjoy listening to accents from all over the world without even leaving home.

Log on and listen at:
http://accent.gmu.edu

PROJECT CHRONICLES LEARNING TO WRITE ACADEMIC ENGLISH

With grant support from University Life and IRB approval, a team of writing center researchers has been interviewing non-native students from many different countries to find out their experiences with learning to write American academic English.

The research project will culminate in an audio-enhanced, interactive website that will serve as a resource for ESL students as well as teachers and tutors. Researchers include *Eiman Hajabbasi*, *Lisa Busiahn*, *Anna Habib*, undergraduate peer tutor *Alex Antram*, and *Terry Zawacki* as principal investigator.

ESL Tutoring

Eiman praised the student for the authenticity of his ideas, and then set a session agenda that included his concerns about grammar, and also larger structural issues she identified in the paper.

After a discussion of these larger structural concerns, Eiman moved onto his grammar concerns. She had made small check marks in the margins of the essay as the student read aloud, indicating sentences with grammatical mistakes. Next she noted which errors were repeated in the paper, beginning with comma splices. She pointed out a comma splice error and asked the student to explain the error. When he could not, she broke the sentence down, explaining that there were two independent clauses separated by a comma.

The student understood the difference between independent and dependent clauses, which is typical of many non-native speakers who have had to study grammar in learning English, and suggested that he could separate the sentences with a period.

Eiman praised his solution but also explained that students commonly make the mistake of comma splicing in order to avoid short, choppy sentences. She showed him how to use a semicolon or a coordinating conjunction to fuse two independent clauses in the same sentence.

After she'd drawn a chart demonstrating this concept, they found several examples of comma splices in following paragraphs, and they worked through them together, with the student coming up with the solutions. Using this same teaching strategy, Eiman turned to two other patterns of errors: incorrect or missing articles and inconsistent verb tense.

At the end of the session, Eiman gave the student all the charts she had drawn to demonstrate the grammar concepts they'd discussed. She also gave him writing center handouts on count and non-count nouns as well as independent vs. dependent clauses.

The student seemed receptive and engaged in the session, leaving with some valuable tools to improve this paper and others he will be writing.

ADVICE & STRATEGIES FOR
WORKING WITH ESL WRITERS

Writing teachers are often asked why we don't teach "grammar." In fact, we do teach grammar, but typically we do so in the context of students' writing rather than as a separate category of instruction.

Patrick Hartwell's article "Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar" gives a good explanation of the grammar we acquire when we learn our first language, the rules we learn along the way—correctly or incorrectly--and the grammar described in our grammar books.

While Hartwell identifies five levels of grammar in his article, the three described here are particularly useful in thinking about how and whether to teach grammar separate from a student's writing:

Internalized grammar, i.e., the grammar in our heads. How many of us, for example, can give the rule for arranging the adjectives in this sentence? "Four little French girls walked to school." Or for making plurals of these nonsense words: thole, flitch, plast?

Grammar as general rules, which may or may not be applied in practice. We have rules for article use, for example, but also lots of exceptions. Why do we say in American English, for example, "I went to college" versus "I went to a university."

School grammar, i.e., the names and functions of parts of speech and parts of sentences. Most of us native speakers could probably parse this nonsense sentence: The scallywags gamboled falloly in the boody mires. (e.g. "scallywags" is a plural noun and the subject of the sentence).

We often draw on school grammar to decide whether to use the nominative or objective case ("she" or "her," for example), or where to insert punctuation. In order to draw on school grammar, however, we first need to

notice that there might be a question about which word form or mark of punctuation is correct.

Why do the errors in students' writing "excite our fury," Joe Williams asks in "The Phenomenology of Error." We often don't notice errors in our peers' prose or in professional work, he says, because we are not looking for errors. We find so many errors in student work because we expect to find them and we watch for them. Errors are located not simply on the page, he argues, but also in readers.

Moreover, some errors are particularly noticeable and stigmatizing, e.g. ESL errors, class-based errors, and dialect errors (especially black vernacular).

What errors do you tend to notice? Tell students!

Advice on responding to errors:

Give feedback on content and structure first.

Students will often fix sentence-level errors when they revise. Sentences that you may have spent your valuable time editing may not even show up in a revised draft. When you focus on editing errors, students may also miss the message that their paper requires larger scale revision.

Think of minor errors as a kind of "foreign accent" in the writing of your non-native students.

Ask yourself what errors you're willing to tolerate and how flexible you can be (based on your sense of the workplaces your students will be entering). It's also helpful to consider all of the "Englishes" spoken globally and the impact on our standard edited English.

If errors interfere with meaning by "disturbing syntax," correct the sentence and give an explanation of the serious error(s), if possible.

Here's an example (with credit to Leki, p. 130): "English language use much people." This sentence contains two "minor" errors-- much people" instead of "many people" and a missing article for "English language." It also contains a "disturbing" syntax error with the subject and object of the sentence reversed. If the sentence is changed to "Much people use English language," is it more acceptable to you?

Practice a limited approach to feedback.

Comment on only some problems, not all. ESL writers frequently think that they will improve if all of their errors are corrected; however, research on second-language writing shows this is not necessarily the case.

Works Cited:

Hartwell, Patrick. "Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar" *College English.* (February 1985).

Leki, Ilona. *Understanding ESL Writers: A Guide for Teachers.* Boston: Boynton/Cook, 1992.

Williams, Joseph. "The Phenomenology of Error" *College Composition and Communication.* (May 1981).

Terry Myers Zawacki, Director
WAC/UWC

HOW TO EDIT A PAPER: A CHECKLIST TO GIVE YOUR STUDENTS

As you work through the pile of student papers on your desk, how often do you find yourself wishing that you had a good checklist to give students to help them find and fix their errors and also to encourage them to be responsible for keeping track of the mistakes they seem to keep making in paper after paper? If that's been your wish, then you'll find a useful checklist you can download at this url: *wac.gmu.edu/program/newsletter/ esl_checklist.*

The handout, which can be especially useful for ESL students, includes advice on how to keep an error log and details a number of strategies students can use to find their own mistakes. Here's a sampling of some of the advice you'll find on the handout:

1. Find your errors:
Read your paper out loud and point to each word with a pencil as you read.

Read through your paper looking for only one of the errors you know you frequently make. To help focus your attention, use a ruler or piece of paper to cover everything but one line at a time. Circle all suspected errors of that type. Then go through the same process for the next type of error. When you focus on only one type of error at a time, the editing process seems less overwhelming.

Use a different color ink for each error type to help distinguish them visually.

After you've corrected the errors, ask a trusted reader to look at your work and/or use a grammar checker on the computer.

2. Check for varied sentence structure and length:
With a pen in your hand, read your paper out loud. At the end of each sentence, make a slash mark (/). Look at your sentences: Are they very long? Very short? You may want to combine some very short sentence and/or break up some very long sentences.

3. Check for complete sentences:
Focus on individual sentences and look at the subjects and verbs you've already underlined to see if each of your sentences includes a subject and a verb. Pay close attention to sen-

tences beginning with words like "because," "when," "since," and "if"; these are examples of conjunctions that can cause sentence fragments unless the clause they introduce is attached to another complete idea.

4. Buy a good ESL dictionary:
In the writing center, we use the *Longman Dictionary of American English,* which is designed specifically for non-native English speakers and provides valuable grammatical and syntactical information that dictionaries for native speakers lack.

Terry Myers Zawacki

See the online version of
Writing @ Center
for a printable list to give to
your students.

*wac.gmu.edu/program/
newsletter/esl_checklist.pdf*

LIBRARIAN'S CORNER

THE CITATION CONTEXTUALIZED

Kevin E. Simons (ksimons@gmu.edu), Instruction Coordinator, University Libraries

Context: 1. the parts of a discourse that surround a word or passage and can throw light on its meaning
             2. the interrelated conditions in which something exists or occurs   *Merriam-Webster Online (http://www.m-w.com/)*

What is a citation? When I ask in my classes, students say it tells someone where to find information. But when it comes to data mining for information, this definition is too limiting. For all researchers the citation is the most vital component to accessing information. The citation, or the record in digital speak, is a representation, a surrogate if you will, of the actual item.

Consider looking for information in a library without the citation. One would need to open each book separately to see if it has any information pertinent to the need. As ridiculous as this sounds, it is exactly how surface Web search engines

look for information. The "citation" in Web search engines like Google is the Web page itself.

Generally speaking, the Web is more about displaying information, than for accessing information. Web page creators follow conventions of design within the structure of HTML, but there are no requirements for how this structure is used. The citation, on the other hand, is comprised of specific and required fields (author, title, source, etc.). These fields describe the item with carefully constructed and concise language.

How does knowledge of the citation help

students? In last Fall's Writing @ Center I tweaked the definition of Context from the Merriam Webster online dictionary to speak of the interrelated conditions in which information exists.

It is by understanding the purpose and structure of the citation and its relationship to the processes used by computers to retrieve results in today's digital age, that students can begin to utilize even the most basic search principles to find results more efficiently and effectively. When discussing research papers in your classes, expand the definition of a citation to contextualize its importance to finding the best information.

How Correct Must ...

not just the content or your knowledge level. Success in business is impacted by your ability to communicate your knowledge in a clear written format."

Michael Lyons, Information Technology:
"I don't penalize students for poor writing, unless I can't understand the point they are trying to make. I don't discriminate based on a student's background (or name, or appearance). I do my best to grade all students fairly. I expect students to be able to write at a professional level by the time they graduate. If they don't write well when they enter GMU, they need to get help to improve their abilities."

Andrew Wingfield, New Century College and WAC committee consultant:
"Each of the writers in my courses starts at a different place, and I want each of them to make progress. Grades are one form of incentive. After I meet with an ESL writer and we agree on the elements that need the most attention, I'm going to look most carefully for signs of progress with those elements. If other parts of the writing have some errors, I'm not likely to penalize those very harshly. I try to identify an ESL student's main pattern(s) of errors, sit down with the student, and talk about how to improve this facet or these two most problematic facets of the writing."

Susan Durham, College of Nursing and Health Science and WAC committee member:
"If the paper has typos and run-on sentences and awkward flow problems or does not meet the criteria for the assignment, then I take off as I would for any other student. If writing is sloppy and unrefined, then I do take off. If the words used don't make sense ,then I take off. But if they make sense but are not exactly the way a westerner would write them and I do understand, then I do not take off. But minor errors that do not affect the meaning and that have a definite pattern related to their native tongue, I will excuse."

How important is it to you to have non-native speakers write correct American English? Are there certain kinds of errors you won't tolerate in the writing of non-native students?

Tom C. Owens, Music:
"I am more likely to be lenient with non-native students in clarity of writing. I'm willing to work a bit harder to see the points they are trying to make."

Keith Davies, Chemistry:
"In CHEM 446 (with a class size of ~24), the exam format requires written answers, and, at some point before the first exam, I usually mention, often in response to pre-exam questions, that I am expecting answers to be concisely written in complete sentences and with correct English. However, when it comes to grading chemistry short-answer questions, I usually accept, without penalty, much less. I suppose, at that point, I am happy to see that the 'chemistry' I am looking for is there, and it is difficult enough assigning partial points to 'half-correct' chemistry answers without having to formally assign points for English or penalize students for lack of it."

Khondkar Islam, Information Technology:
"I feel all my students including non-native speakers should write correct American English. Incorrect writing by native and non-native students would lead to point loss in their assignments. They need to be at par with their peers. If they face difficulty, they need to seek assistance at the writing center."

Suzanne Scott, NCC:
"As the students have gotten better and better at writing on the sentence level, I find that I have become much more concerned with structure and content and seeing the contributions that many of the non-native students make, even when the grammar isn't perfect."

Joni Finegold, NCC:
"Generally speaking, I grade equally on content, but allow some flexibility for errors that are results of "lost in translation" – i.e., use of article or plural, odd sentence construction, etc. Errors that could easily be corrected, such as misspelled and incorrect compound words (or lack of) are penalized equally."

Do you correct mistakes in written English on students' papers? If so, what kinds of mistakes do you tend to correct?

Tom C. Owens, Music:
"I will try to point out errors that they are making consistently and to focus on types of errors in the paper as a whole. I will also do more extensive editing and suggestions on a short passage--one or two paragraphs--as a model. I encourage them to go to the writing center and to turn in multiple drafts."

Beth Schneider, SOM:
"SOM 301 faculty also provide feedback on grammar and mechanics. We usually only point out the errors in the first two paragraphs and, if the student's writing is really poor, we

attach an additional sheet that denotes exactly the problems they have. They are then referred to the writing center."

Davies, Chemistry:
Having had this topic brought to my attention, I think I will in future *include a sentence in the syllabus, stating that I am expecting short answers to be concisely written in complete sentences, and with correct English.* It certainly upsets me sometimes when I think that those with very bad 'writing skills' are often seniors who are about to go out as GMU graduates [emphasis added]."

Mourning

It's September 11, 2004
and my father can't figure out why,
as we pause in The Coachman's parking lot

on our way to breakfast
the morning after the night
my mother died, all the flags

stand at half-mast. I watch the bulbs
in the bank sign across the street
switch from 11:03 a.m.

to 86 degrees so quickly
neither time nor temperature has a chance
to change. It's this crisp

exactness I'm after today,
down to minute and degree,
though I still resist the urge

to pull him close, his elbow
wrapped in my hand, lean nearer
to his head upturned toward the sun

and whisper the difference between
half-mast and half-staff, further
and farther, lost and gone.

You would have wanted to do
the same if you'd seen him
questioning the sun that morning,

heard the furl and snap
of the flags twice as close.
You too would have wanted

to map borders between words,
these things that floated over
my mother her last seven days.

Even though we knew
she couldn't hear, she heard.
Then she didn't, and we were left

with our words pointing back at us,
accusing you and I, you and me,
we who never quite got it right.

- Scott Weaver
MFA, Poetry

ELI PROGRAM HELPS NON-NATIVE SPEAKERS REDUCE ERRORS

The English Language Institute offers a program of sustained tutoring called the Assessment and Tutoring Services (ATS) program for non-native speakers of English. Students who are referred by a faculty member are eligible for **eight free hours** of tutoring with the same tutor, scheduled one hour a week for eight weeks.

Rather than focusing only on the challenges of particular writing assignments, the tutoring helps students reduce problems that recur in their writing.

Common patterns of errors include:
- sentence structure and word order;
- verb tenses and forms;
- singular and plural forms and agreement; and
- unclear references.

Broader writing problems common to many non-native speakers of English can also be addressed in sustained tutoring. These include problems with:
- topic development
- paraphrasing
- plagiarism
- appropriate academic style
- understanding assignments and the expectations of faculty.

To refer a student for the ATS program, faculty should contact **Melissa Allen,** Coordinator of Support Services for Non-Native Speakers of English at the English Language Institute, via email at **malle2@gmu.edu** or phone at **703-993-3642.**

Writing Center Applauds Undergrad Peer Tutors & Writing Fellows

The writing center has been fortunate to have the following students sign on as peer tutors this spring. We also continue to appreciate our writing fellows. In light of Mason's strong WAC mission, it's impressive to see the range of majors these students represent.

Peer tutors:
– Million Fikre, NCC and Government
– Elizabeth Fraser, IT
– Ahriel Harris, Accounting
– Abby Redmon, English
– Andrew Schleuter, History
– Joanna Wiedel, Psychology

Writing Fellows:
– Alex Antram, Anthropology. Writing Fellow for Theater 350, with Professor Ed Gero
– Tonka Dobreva, Public and International Affairs. Writing fellow for Computer Science 306, with Professor Tamara Maddox
– Katie Fair, Social Work. Writing fellow for Nursing 465, with Professor Susan Durham

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GRAMMAR CORNER

JOHN COULD HAVE BEEN BEING TAKEN ...

by Virginia Bouchard, ESL Specialist / TA

To a non-native writer, the English verb system can seem daunting, but it really need not be. Problems arise when the student stretches the limits of what can be included in a verb structure by adding unnecessary or mistaken information.

Starting with a simple construction of one main verb, we add one or more auxiliaries to change tense or to place what we say in reference to another point in time. This allows us to provide our listeners with compact detailed information about an event and when it occured in relation to other events.

As well as adding meaning to the main verb, each auxiliary places specific requirements on the verb that follows it, whether it is an auxiliary or a main verb. The following chart shows the basic verb constructions using only one auxiliary.

This system allows us to communicate the most complex events and ideas imaginable.

Tense-Auxiliary and its demands on the next Verb	Example	Use
Modal – requires a present tense verb; adds no ending to the next verb	may work; should take;	alters or judges the intention of the actor; introduces uncertainty
Perfect – auxiliary is a form of to have; requires a present tense verb stem; adds *-en* or *-ed* to the main verb	have worked; had taken;	present – action occurring in the past and ending at an unspecified time past – places action before another completed action
Progressive – the auxiliary is a form of *to be*; requires a present-tense verb stem; adds *-ing*	is working; was taking;	present –continuing action that started in the past and hasn't ended past – action over time that began and ended in the past
Passive – auxiliary is a form of *to be*; adds *-en* or *-ed*	is worked (on); was taken;	an object is shifted to the subject position allowing special emphasis