WRITING @ CENTER

Busy as we all are with the day-to-day demands of our work, it's hard to make space for extra reading; nevertheless, I invite you to peruse this issue of the Writing @ Center newsletter, and—ta-da—for your time, we've included a chance to win two free tickets to a selected Center for the Arts performance (see inside). Read on!

—*Terry Myers Zawacki, Director WAC/UWC*

News from the Center

In 2000-2001 (Fall and Spring Semesters), the Writing Center saw a total of 1371 clients for 3087 sessions, including:

- ✎ **2519 sessions in Rob A**
- ✎ **183 OWL sessions**
- ✎ **385 sessions in the JC location**

Writing Center tutors also conducted **194 "road shows"** (in-class orientations to our services) and **27 in-class workshops** on topics ranging from thesis statements to peer review to grammar.

WAC Publication

Jeanne Sorrell published "Stories in the Nursing Classroom: Writing and Learning from Stories" in the April 2001 issue of the WAC-based journal <u>Language and Learning Across the Disciplines</u>.

I N S I D E . . .

E-mail Mentoring in Psychology

James F. Sanford, Psychology
and Kelly D. Chandler, Undergraduate Psychology Major

Every fall since 1996, the Psychology Department has offered an e-mail mentoring program to freshmen who have declared psychology as a major and who are enrolled in designated linked sections of ENGL 101 and PSYC 100. Two to four freshmen are linked with an advanced psychology major (most of whom are members of Psi Chi, the National Honor Society in Psychology, and/or the honors program in psychology), and four to eight advanced students are selected to mentor the freshmen. Mentors assist freshmen in understanding concepts in introductory psychology, help them adjust to college life, educate them about the culture of psychology as a discipline, and provide them with feedback on papers in English 101. While all mentors meet with their mentees a few times during the semester, the bulk of the communication is electronic.

Handling Errors in ESL Students' Papers

Sonja Knecht-Hoshi, ESL Specialist in the Writing Center

When you are confronted with a paper that you're not sure how to tackle, the following tips may help:

- Errors in ESL writing can take many forms. Determine if the errors interfere with meaning or not. Errors that interfere with meaning can be handled differently than errors that don't. Also, determine which of the errors you can tolerate better than others. For example, you may forgive a problem with articles (a, an, and, the), but find fragments unacceptable.

    - For errors that don't interfere with meaning:

        - Don't fix all of the errors. It takes a lot of your time and doesn't help your students if you fix each error for them.

        - Make the error stand out by either underlining or numbering the error. Limit the type of errors that you highlight, perhaps to no more than 3 kinds of errors in the same paper.

        - Correct the error the first time and briefly explain the error. With subsequent similar errors, put the same number next to the error in the margin.

    - Underline errors that interfere with meaning:
      In the margin next to the error, explain what you as a reader don't understand and ask questions that will help the student to understand your confusion.

- If a paper has more errors than you can tolerate, don't be afraid to stop reading. Draw a line. Tell the student you stopped reading at the line and explain why, highlighting some of the errors you noted. Ask the student to revise the paper before you read it again.

Writing Assessment Underway in Departments

Terry Myers Zawacki and Ruth Green, Assistant Director, Institutional Assessment

Some Background: In November 2000, the State Council of Higher Education (SCHEV) notified state higher ed institutions that we would be responsible for assessing our students' writing competencies and reporting that information to Richmond. Each institution was asked to develop its own definition and standards for competency, an instrument for measuring competencies, and a time frame for reporting on the results. Fortunately, the provost-convened Writing Assessment Group* at Mason was already engaged in designing an assessment process and criteria for evaluation to support the synthesis requirement and to give us much-needed information to inform the work of the Writing Across the Curriculum program. We were committed to a process which put responsibility for writing assessment into the hands of departmental faculty because we knew from WAC experience that faculty often have very different definitions of what makes writing good based on their own disciplinary expectations. We looked at the SCHEV mandate as an opportunity to move forward with our assessment plans.

Proposal to SCHEV: In response to the SCHEV mandate, Mason submitted a plan for selected departmental faculty, led by a departmental writing representative, to assess representative samples of student writing in the major according to a discipline-specific rubric they had developed. In addition to these departmental results, the proposal also noted that we would include data from the results of a faculty survey on student writing and responses to questions about writing from graduating senior and alumni surveys. Based on the strong commitment some academic units had already made to improving student writing, the assessment group proposed that the College of Nursing and Health Science and the School of Management would report in the first cycle—Spring 2002; selected CAS departments and undergraduate units in Education in the second cycle—Spring 2003; and IT&E, Visual and Performing Arts, and remaining CAS departments in the third cycle—Spring 2004.

Faculty Workshop: With funding from a provost's general education grant, Terry Zawacki, Ruth Fischer, Chris Thaiss, and Ruth Green led a workshop on writing assessment for faculty writing representatives from Nursing, School of Management, Psychology, Classical and Modern Languages, Public and International Affairs, Philosophy, English, and Geography. The workshop was designed to model a process for collecting and using data on student writing in the majors for those faculty in the first and second reporting cycle; it will be repeated for departments in the second and third reporting cycles. Departmental writing representatives were asked to use or modify the workshop process with their own faculty to generate criteria and to assess selected samples of writing from an assignment in a writing-intensive course.

Issues Raised in Workshop:
• While criteria for determining writing competency may be similar across disciplines these criteria are applied differently within disciplines and may also vary from course to course and paper to paper. Because of these variations, care needs to be taken to choose, for assessment purposes, an assignment which best represents genres in the major and the competencies students are expected to demonstrate. In majors with one designated writing-intensive course, it may be possible to ask all teachers to give the same assignment; however, it may be difficult to find one assignment which can be given across sections or in any of several writing-intensive courses students may take in some majors. In some units, faculty plan to assess a range of work in, for example, capstone portfolios or course portfolios.

• Some faculty in large majors were concerned about how labor-intensive the process might be. They suggested that even a representative sample of papers could still be quite large; that they may have only a few full-time faculty to call upon, those who routinely teach writing-intensive courses; that there seems to be no funding to pay adjunct or teaching assistants for scoring even though they might also teach W-I sections; and that it could be difficult to get faculty together for a scoring session.

In spite of these concerns, all of the faculty representatives participating in the workshop said they thought the scoring process would be quite useful to take back to their departments and could see the benefits, beyond mandated assessment, of reading and discussing samples of student writing according to faculty-generated criteria for competent writing in the major. Members of the Writing Assessment Group have assured the writing representatives of their continued assistance with the process.

Next Steps Internally: It is the hope of the Writing Assessment Group that findings from departmental assessment will be reported to faculty and used to inform individual and programmatic change. Departments might develop partnerships to improve student writing, as the School of Management has. With funding from SOM, the English department has hired a composition specialist to teach sections of the new SOM writing-intensive course along with English 302 Business. Departments might also develop and disseminate common criteria for good writing in the major as demonstrated in the papers students write for an array of courses.

In consultation with departmental writing representatives, the Writing Assessment Group will also determine what constituencies within the university would benefit from knowing the findings of departmental writing assessment.

Next Steps Externally: Following the cycles for reporting to SCHEV, writing representatives from the various academic units with the assistance of members of the Writing Assessment Group will write a report of their assessment findings. While we have a template for departments to use for reporting their findings to the Writing Assessment Group, we have not yet determined the most judicious and efficient way to report overall findings to SCHEV. This topic will be taken up in subsequent meetings.

* **Writing Assessment Group (feel free to contact any of us for more information):**

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Faculty, Provost Extol Writing Fellow Opportunity

Scott Berg, Assistant Director, UWC

In the spring semester of 2002 the University Writing Center will once again offer interested faculty from across the curriculum the chance to work with writing fellows—undergraduate peer tutors assigned to classes in order to assist the students with their writing by way of consultation with faculty, individual conferences with students, class workshops, and paper draft comments.

George Mason's Writing Fellow pilot program, now in its third year under the guidance of Dr. Terry Myers Zawacki, UWC Director, provides both peer writing tutors and faculty new ways to incorporate writing instruction into courses from departments across campus.

Erica Wilmore, a Writing Center peer tutor paired with Dr. John Burns in RELI 251 (Biblical Studies: The Old Testament), says her experience has been "wholeheartedly and entirely positive," and adds that she feels "particularly useful in being able to walk students through the process of writing, which is something not all professors are able to do because of time constraints."

Wilmore's contributions to the course include in-class workshops on writing clear theses and organizing material for coherence and flow. She developed the workshops in conjunction with Dr. Burns, using examples and suggestions drawn from course content. Dr. Burns credits the Writing Fellow with allowing him to give writing a kind of attention usually impossible outside of smaller composition classes:

"In the large introductory classes that Religion faculty routinely teach," Dr. Burns says, "we suggest but do not demand drafts as numbers militate against this. Thanks to Erica my students had and are having a two tier approach to their papers. Last year they evaluated the experience very positively and felt more connected with the class."

Faculty members who have used writing fellows over the past three years include Burns, Scott Berg in English, Honors professors John Cheng (of History) and Jonathan Gifford (of Public and International Affairs), and Victoria Rader in Sociology. Dr. Peter Stearns, University Provost, is currently paired with peer tutor Maya Johnson to assist the writing of students in his World History course, HIST 125.

"I'm very enthusiastic about the program," Dr. Stearns says. "It's well worth doing for the instructor, and has the added benefit of giving the writing fellow added credentials."

For Dr. Zawacki, another primary advantage of the program is the way faculty can improve their teaching based on direct conversation with talented and experienced undergraduate writers. "Through the writing fellow, faculty learn how to better work with writers and their writing," she says, "what makes a good assignment, what kinds of response techniques are most effective." Writing fellows, she adds, also help faculty to develop more precise and helpful evaluation criteria, even to the point of developing these criteria during class time so that students have a clearer sense of what a professor is looking for when he or she sits down to grade a stack of papers.

"It's a wonderful opportunity for students," Dr. Zawacki says, "and it also provides faculty development when trained writing tutors give insights about writing to professors based on their tutoring experiences, including the kinds of assignments and language students have difficulty with."

Attention Faculty:

If you teach upper-division courses and have identified some talented writers who also have good interpersonal skills, will you recommend these students to us so that we might contact them about applying for **CAS 390: Peer Tutoring in Writing in the Disciplines**? We're interested in recruiting students in majors across the university, so those of you teaching English 302 and writing-intensive courses might pay particular attention to potential candidates. Email tzawacki@gmu.edu.

How WC Tutors Begin Sessions

Ever wonder what students ask for at the beginning of a typical tutoring session and how the tutor responds? Here's a scenario:

Introductions, then--
Tutor: What do you want to work on today?
Student: I need help with grammar and proofreading.
We've found "grammar" and "proofreading" to be catch-alls for a variety of difficulties the student may be having. Unless a teacher has specifically sent a student to work on his/her grammar, the tutor and the student will set an agenda based on the student's goals and the tutor's sense of what needs to be addressed.

Tutor: Do you have a written assignment we might look at?
We find that only about half of the students come with written assignments.

Tutor: I see from your teacher's assignment that you are supposed to do [blank]. Is that your understanding? Do you have any specific areas of your paper you'd like to look at?
OR
Tutor: Since you don't have your assignment, can you explain in detail to me what you're supposed to be doing in this paper? What directions has your teacher given you? When is it due?
Teachers' assignments and/or written comments on drafts are most helpful to tutors. Students are often unclear about what their teachers want when they do not have a written assignment or have received little guidance on a draft.

Tutor: We'll begin by having you read the paper out loud and I'll make notes on scratch paper *(or marks in the margins)* about what we need to work on. *(If the paper is more than a few pages long, the tutor will suggest the student read one or two pages aloud and then summarize the rest, or they skim the paper together.)* Once we've looked at the organization of the paper, we'll address your grammar concerns. You said you have trouble with writing fragmented or unclear sentences, so I'll be on the lookout for those kinds of problems especially. Any other concerns? Let's get started.

WIN TWO TICKETS TO A SPRING CENTER FOR THE ARTS PERFORMANCE!!!

(Mark Morris Dance Group, National Acrobats of China, or Shanghai Quartet)

Just send an email (subject line: raffle drawing) to Terry Zawacki, tzawacki@gmu.edu, answering the following question:

What kind of articles would you like to see in *Writing @ Center*?

We'll randomly select and notify the winner by December 14th!
(Special thanks to Rick Davis for supplying this prize)

Teaching Tip!

At the beginning of class, I hand out notecards on which students write their response to a question I pose. I find that giving students an opportunity to organize their thoughts results in greater participation in the ensuing discussion. This technique works in small classes of 20 or so as well as large classes of 200 or more. At the end of class, I collect the notecards. After reading them, I report any especially interesting points not discussed in class. Turning in notecards counts as class participation and affects my grading of borderline cases.

*- **George Andrykovitch, Biology***

E-mail Mentoring

The mentoring program has been more than successful by almost any measure. Retention surveys conducted after the initial semester of the program found that only half as many mentored freshmen failed to return to GMU as other freshmen, both for the following spring semester and in the succeeding fall. Satisfaction surveys almost always find that both freshmen and mentors think the program helps freshmen develop better writing competence and better understanding of psychology and college life. It also helps mentors develop their professional skills as future psychologists. A recurring theme that emerges from the surveys is that the mentoring program works to develop a community of learners and writers within the psychology major. E-mail dialogue, combined with other interactions in the linked class sections, helps freshman develop appropriate voice, tone, and audience for writing in psychology. One notable piece of evidence for the success of the program is that former mentees are now becoming mentors, and one (the second author of this paper) was a mentee in 1997, a mentor in 1999, and assistant director of the mentoring program in 2000 and 2001.

The mentoring program requires a great deal of time and effort. Every spring, an invitation to apply to serve as mentor is distributed to upper class psychology majors. The program director then selects who will serve and conducts a mentoring workshop during fall registration week. Since the second year of the program, an assistant director has been responsible for overseeing day-to-day communication between mentors and mentees. Every e-mail message is copied to the assistant director, and some are also copied to the instructor of the linked English 101 course. At the end of the semester, all mentors reply to a survey about the quality of the program as well as what should be maintained and what should be changed in program administration. One change that has been implemented as a result of feedback is that somewhat less reliance is being placed on e-mail as opposed to face-to-face communication for mentoring.

The following are quotes from final surveys of mentors. They clearly show the value of the program and the importance of developing a learning community among freshmen and mentors.

• "…mentoring provides an intrinsic and intangible gift, the gift of sharing knowledge and experience the mentor has had in college and in life with someone who may need guidance."

• "…if the mentoring program had been around when I started here, I feel it would have given me a greater sense of connection with the school and with my peers."

• "…the program provides the freshmen with a 'human' resource. The students were able to look to me for assistance when they were unable to complete a task…or [to] simply narrow down a paper topic."

When the e-mail mentoring program began in 1996, it was a response to the advancing technology of electronic communication. Only recently had all GMU students received access to campus e-mail accounts, and the program was an attempt to use e-mail in a way that facilitated learning. But after the first couple of years, we came to realize that the medium is not the most important message. Instead, the continued interaction between freshmen and advanced students in developing a joint sense of community is the most important aspect of the program. The assistance from mentors in understanding psychology concepts and writing in the discipline is part of the community development.

A final note: the e-mail mentoring program has only been offered during fall semesters. This is because too few freshman majors enroll in both ENGL 101 and PSYC 100 during spring. We feel that it is essential that a community of learners and writers who are linked in common classes participate. While isolated one-on-one mentoring would almost certainly be of benefit, the primary value of the e-mail mentoring program lies in its promulgation of multiple interactions among students at different points in their college education.

James F. Sanford is Associate Chair for Undergraduate Studies in the Department of Psychology. He helped develop the e-mail mentoring program in 1996 and has directed it from its inception. Kelly D. Chandler is a senior psychology major and past president of the GMU chapter of Psi Chi. They will jointly present a poster on e-mail mentoring at the 24th Annual National Institute for the Teaching of Psychology in St. Petersburg Beach, FL in January 2002.

Handling Errors

• Be aware that some ESL students will plagiarize unintentionally. They probably do not fully understand what plagiarism is and are not aware it is considered intellectual robbery.

• In your closing comments, comment on content, organization, and last, on no more than 3 errors the student should work to correct in future papers. If you allow revisions, make students responsible for telling you, in a written memo perhaps, what errors they have paid attention to correcting.

• Finally, suggest your students come to the Writing Center. The English Language Institute funds *two ESL tutors* every semester that are trained to help ESL writers.