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Writing Centers Feel the Crunch

[Fall 2003 / Focus](#)

By Lynn Makau, Eliana Schonberg, and Sue Mendelsohn

Funding Cuts Force Centers to Make Hard Choices

Writing centers are feeling the effects of budget reductions across higher education nationwide. Like other student services that don't offer credits or produce revenue, writing centers are particularly vulnerable to budget cuts. Community colleges, four-year colleges, and universities across the country are asking writing centers to make hard choices—choices that will affect consultant hiring, pay, and benefits as well as hours of operation, services, technological resources, and administration.

The Higher Education Budget Picture

"Nearly every state is in fiscal crisis," according to the 2002 *Fiscal Survey of the States*. "Amid a slowing national economy, state revenues have shrunk at the same time that spending pressures are mounting—particularly for Medicaid and other healthcare—creating massive budget shortfalls" (qtd. in Palmer and Gillilan 8). As a result, public institutions of higher education are currently confronting what Wake Forest University Chief Financial Officer Louis R. Morrell calls "probably the most difficult period universities have ever had" (qtd. in Pulley, "Another Downer"). A survey by the Center for the Study of Education Policy shows a drop in state higher education funding from a 4.6% increase in 2002 to a mere 1.2% increase in 2003; the 2003 numbers have fallen below the inflation rate, making this the smallest increase in a decade (Palmer and Gillilan 1). (See the *Fiscal Survey's* national summary of higher education spending and state-by-state breakdowns at http://www.coe.ilstu.edu/grapevine/FY01_02.pdf.)

Community colleges are particularly vulnerable. While four-year institutions can make up for cuts in state funding by drawing on federal grants, tuition from non-resident students, and charitable giving, two-year schools depend largely on state support (Hebel). California and Oregon community colleges are some of the hardest hit. California community colleges are deciding where to make cuts after losing \$86 million, or 1.1% of their state appropriations (Hebel). Two-year institutions in Oregon have lost 6% of their state funding (Potter). And rising enrollments are straining budgets even further. "Community colleges end up having to do more with less," says Cynthia A. Barnes, the Education Commission of the States former executive director of the Center for Community College Policy (qtd. in Hebel).

Although private colleges and universities are less affected by state cuts, they are not immune from funding woes. In addition to drops in state grants and funding, declines in charitable giving and university endowments have blended to form a cocktail of financial worries for all institutions of higher education. A National Association of College and University Business Officers survey of 654

colleges and universities found an average 6% loss in endowment investment returns (Pulley, "Another Downer"). And for the first time since 1975, charitable giving to higher education dropped in 2002, down 1.1% from the previous year (Pulley, "Giving"). To compound the problem, several major philanthropic foundations—the Annenberg Foundation, the Atlantic Philanthropies, and the Pew Charitable Trusts—have recently announced cutbacks in grants to colleges and universities (Marcy). Stanford, Duke, Dartmouth, Oberlin, and others are feeling the pinch (Pulley, "Another Downer").

Writing Centers' Piece of the Pie

Budget cuts and rising expenses have writing center administrators looking for ways to save money without decreasing services to students, and consultants hoping that they can keep their jobs. Some budget decreases have been dramatic, resulting in serious cuts of staff, benefits, and student services. At Portland State University in Oregon, an almost 50% decrease of the writing center's budget in the coming year may result in staffing cuts at a center that already lists "numerous" volunteers among its employees (Burnell).

However, the situation is not all grim. Many WCs have sailed through the budget storm unscathed so far. At Duke, for example, Vicki Russell, director of the university's Writing Studio explains, "Our program is only three years old and growing, and the powers that be are very supportive of our efforts." Thanks to a 5.6% budget increase and semester-length stipends, the Studio has added four new tutoring positions.

How can we explain the disparity between the haves and the have-nots? The answer lies in the various ways writing centers are funded: by deans, academic departments, student fees, and/or endowments. Centers that receive their funding from a dean, department, or another administrative unit are subject to the discretion of that administrator. One writing center in a public college saw its budget situation improve markedly when a new dean stepped in. "I've been around colleges for most of my work life," says the director of that center (who wishes to remain anonymous) "and I'm still amazed at how much the success of programs depends on the individuals who hold the purse strings."

The University of Delaware reflects the potential benefits of interdependency between writing centers and academic departments. The Delaware Writing Center staff includes ten teaching assistants on loan from the English Department in addition to half-time faculty consultants and undergraduate Honors Writing Program fellows. The teaching assistants work fifteen hours per week in the Center while they are trained to teach English 101 by the Center's staff. Clyde Moneyhun, the director of Delaware's Writing Center, feels essentially positive about his center's future and notes key changes he foresees to make its expansion possible. As he explains, "I have several irons in the fire to help us expand: a request that some of the half-time faculty go full time, a request for more money for undergrad tutors, etc. We have strong support in upper admin[istration], and I suspect we'll be okay in the future—but one never knows!"

Other writing centers have recognized the benefits of combining different funding sources to build stability and flexibility. For example, the University of Arkansas at Little Rock's University Writing Center is funded through a combination of state funds and student fees. The Center has been able to weather both state cutbacks in university funding and periodic decreases in student enrollment (Holland).

Centers funded by endowments have greater stability but are still subject to the whims of the stock market. Stanford boasts perhaps a best-case scenario in which a designated endowment ensures support for undergraduate tutors. The two-year-old writing center there is still expanding and has yet to experience budget cuts (Diogenes).

Rising costs of health insurance and tuition also have affected writing centers. While centers that use unpaid interns or volunteers do not experience these costs, centers dependent on paid undergraduate, graduate, or faculty consultants must meet payroll demands. Some writing centers are forced to make difficult decisions that include eliminating staff, reducing benefits, or cutting back hours of operation. Writing centers at state schools in Texas are deciding how to cope with expense increases caused by cuts in state contributions to health care benefits and a looming increase in tuition. The Undergraduate Writing Center at the University of Texas at Austin has a steady source of funding thanks to a student fee, but that funding will have to stretch further to cover the new expenses. As a result, the Center is able to offer fewer positions that carry benefits to graduate students (Blackwood). Lou Rutigliano, writing consultant and master's candidate in journalism, found out this summer that he was going to lose his twenty-hour appointment. Facing the challenge of losing his health benefits and income, he found another job at the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas. "If I hadn't had the other job, I would have had to leave school. I can't afford to rely just on my financial aid. My department doesn't have many TA positions, either."

Consultants are increasingly feeling the effects of belt-tightening decisions. Jon Olson, director of the Penn State University Center for Excellence in Writing, lists restrictions on tutor raises and travel to the National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing as two ways in which Penn State's Undergraduate Writing Center is "beginning to feel the pinch [of university-wide budget cuts]."

Concerns about job security have changed the ways some consultants are approaching their work. Writing consultant Ellen Crowell, a doctoral candidate in English at UT-Austin, recently started developing a new outreach program for Rhetoric and Composition instructors on campus. Thanks to her efforts, she secured one of the coveted twenty-hour positions for next year. "Initially the Writing Center seemed like a more stable place to work than the English department because I was so unsure whether I'd get [a] teaching [appointment], but then it became increasingly clear that the Writing Center was also going to be strapped. I really had to make a case for how I was going to add to the Center next year."

In addition to budget cuts and growing expenses, rising enrollments are only increasing the demands on universities and colleges already strapped by budget woes. The U.S. Education Department National Center for Education Statistics projects a 15% increase in higher education enrollment over the next decade (vii). Sarah Gardner, coordinator of the Tutoring/Writing Center at SUNY-New Paltz, says her center is already feeling the crunch: "We will soon be moving to a location that is half the size of our current space, to my dismay," Gardner writes. She explains that the move follows a "...rapid increase in student population, which has created a space crunch—so our unfortunate move is only indirectly related to budget."

Creative Solutions

Some writing centers are responding to budget restrictions by partnering with

other academic units and searching for additional funding from off-campus sources. At the University of Northern Colorado the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences is asking the Writing Center to cut 19% from their budget. In response, Director Julie Garbus is trying to strengthen her Center's financial outlook by building bridges across the university. "I'm spending the summer asking deans from the other colleges if they can chip in, which seems only fair," she says, "and exploring the possibility of getting funded through student fees, and soliciting outside donors."

Pooling resources with colleges outside of Arts and Sciences, or whichever college serves as the primary funding unit, can reinforce the connection between the writing center and the various academic departments whose students it serves. These connections can prove fruitful if a writing center's budget is threatened, as Tiffany Rouscoupl learned recently. In addition to serving as a tenured faculty member at Salt Lake Community College in Salt Lake City, Utah, Rouscoupl directs a community outreach program that provides writing support for out-of-school adults. The Community Writing Center (CWC) is located on the street level of a low-income housing and multiple-use development in downtown Salt Lake City, across the street from a homeless services center. Since opening in October 2001, the CWC has worked with nearly 700 writers. Despite its strong record, in May 2003 the director and staff feared the Center was in danger of permanently closing its doors. Rouscoupl describes the situation:

During 2002-2003, everything seemed fine, but at the beginning of May, I was informed that the college was going to close the Community Writing Center entirely. The President's Cabinet needed to find ways to cut over a million dollars and our single-line item—an outreach project—was one of their choices. Amazingly, over the next ten days, two executive deans (deans over individual campuses of the college), three division chairs (over academic areas), and one other administrator with a small budget cut dollars from their own budgets to make up the amount that cutting the CWC would provide. Together, they presented their cuts to the President's Cabinet, who agreed to keep the CWC. Our budget stayed completely intact, didn't lose a penny. I've never seen anything like it: a cross-college effort to save an outreach project.

The experience of the Salt Lake Community College Community Writing Center is one positive outcome of the current budget crunch. Like the citizens of a beleaguered city, faculty and administrators in some places are realizing the importance of supporting each other within their local academic communities. Crafton Hills Community College, in Yucaipa, California, presents another alternative. There, Writing Center staff were faced with the choice of reducing the services they offered or re-educating their community to use services in a way that would enable the Center to stay open. Opting for the latter alternative, they are encouraging students to schedule appointments in advance, to visit the Center during off-peak hours, and to persuade faculty to volunteer for one hour per week at the Writing Center (Townsend).

Lessons for the Future

In a study by the National Center for Higher Education, Don Boyd concludes that state funding forecasts will remain stormy for the next eight years (4). In the past two decades states have allocated smaller and smaller proportions of their budgets to higher education. The average now stands at 32%, down from

44% in 1980 (Selingo). Boyd estimates that in eight years state revenues will fall an average of 3.4% short of the spending needed to continue existing services (4). In all, these projections suggest that 44 states will face deficits; Florida, Nevada, Tennessee, Texas, and Wyoming are among those who will be hardest hit (5). The simultaneous jump in college enrollments predicted by the National Center for Education Statistics means that many states will have less money to educate more students.

While much of the budget crisis is beyond the control of individual writing centers, innovative directors are showing that there is still room to maneuver. Although the choices may be difficult, directors have a wide range of options for strengthening their centers' operations and demonstrating to university and external officials the necessity of writing center services.

The responsibility for demonstrating the value of the writing center does not end with its director, however. As consultants find that their once stable jobs are now in question, they too are beginning to make arguments for their own worth. Developing new initiatives to serve student writers and keeping administrators informed of consulting successes on a day-to-day basis are two possible approaches to demonstrating our value.

We invite responses to this article from writing center administrators and consultants. Please share your stories of responses to the budget crisis by writing us at praxis@uwc.utexas.edu We will publish responses in our spring issue.

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Lynn Makau, Sue Mendelsohn, and Eliana Schonberg are graduate consultants at the University of Texas at Austin's Undergraduate Writing Center.

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The California Crash at One Community College

by Diane Putnam

California community colleges were especially hard hit by higher education funding cuts. Diane Putnam explains that those cuts are profoundly affecting the Cabrillo College Writing Center, its students, and its tutors.

A year ago, the Writing Center at **Cabrillo College** in Aptos, California was at the top of its game. Located on the Central Coast near Santa Cruz, Cabrillo was enjoying steady growth in terms of both students and facilities, especially at our **Watsonville Center** just a few miles to the south. The **Writing Center**, in existence since the early 1980s, prepared to greet a new school year with a staff of 25 contract and hourly tutors ready to skillfully render small group and individualized assistance for writers across all sectors of the Cabrillo student population.

Established initially to provide one-on-one tutorial assistance, our writing center had seen tremendous growth in the last five years with the introduction of a sizeable new, lab-based, individualized basic skills program and the development of an online writing lab (OWL). Before these additions, the center already provided a co-requisite group grammar lab for students in our most-populated composition class (English 100), served ESL students at all levels, and tutored students dropping in with papers for any class at the college. The physical space, the Learning Resources Center, is a relatively new expansion to the Library. The Writing Center has a 45-computer writing lab, two-dozen tables where students can work alone and in small groups, a designated ESL lab/room with space to write at tables and computers as well as room to socialize, and three other small classrooms designed for groups of up to ten students.

As fall semester proceeded, enrollment at our Writing Center exceeded 1,300 students and the staff was maxed out as usual in covering nearly 30,000 student hours over the course of one semester. The Center bustled with activity, day and night, as—unbeknownst to any of us—a serious budget crisis was brewing in Sacramento. By mid-fall, the truth was out and the expanding number for that year's state-wide deficit began to cast a pall on the college as the seriousness of the situation began to settle in. Cabrillo, along with the 105 other community colleges in California, faced massive mid-year cuts with more than half the year's budget already spent by December (\$2 million in our case).

A hiring freeze immediately went into place as the school's administrators, unions, faculty senate, and other governing bodies and representatives struggled to get a grip on our grim reality. It was decided to lay off the college's "temporary" staff: folks paid on an hourly basis and/or hired out from temporary agencies, whose salaries constituted nearly a million dollars in annual expenses. At the Writing Center, this decision had a devastating impact, as exactly one-half of our staff were paid on an hourly basis. In the past few years we'd been able to more than double our contract tutors (called Lab Instructional Assistants, or LIAs) to meet the growing demands of new programs and the hundreds of students who were dropping in for help every

semester. With the loss of the temp/hourly tutors, about 30% of our staff hours were eliminated, while at the same time, our basic skills and associate-level English curriculum still demanded that we serve the majority of these students.

To provide the required English labs and crucial tutoring for ESL students, the Writing Center was forced to eliminate other drop-in tutoring for the general school population (except for a three-hour period in the late afternoons, when student traffic was at its lightest). This meant turning away around two hundred students who typically drop in from once to several times each semester with drafts and ideas for papers in English, history, psychology, women's studies, political science, early childhood education, and any other class with writing assignments.

The mental and physical toll on our tutoring staff was tangible by spring. Whenever tutors were out sick, we had no substitutes available, and so "small groups" of ten students doubled and tripled on a fairly regular basis. Tutoring coverage was hugely reduced in the ESL lab and in the computer lab where basic skills students are served. Both labs provide several students at a time with on a one-to-one tutoring, which caused frustration for students already beleaguered by the writing tasks at hand. Morale among the staff and students began to sink, buoyed only slightly by political action, letter writing, and travel to Sacramento for a large (and largely effective) Community College Rally Day in mid-March.

But the mid-year cuts weren't the worst development. As news continued to leak and finally explode out of Sacramento, the 2003-2004 school year promised to be much, much more devastating. As Cabrillo entered spring semester, we were faced with the prospect of cutting another \$4 million from the following year's budget. Every department, office, and instructional division was directed to cut more, and whole programs were reviewed for deletion, especially those funded by state programs that were on the chopping block in Sacramento. These included Matriculation, Disabled Student Services, and the Stroke and Children's Centers. The Writing Center was not spared; we took some more losses in staffing and supplies and began to contemplate trimming more services in the upcoming year.

Today, on the eve of fall 2003, the Writing Center at Cabrillo is a shadow of what it was just a year ago. There will be no drop-in tutoring in writing for most Cabrillo students this year, and English faculty and instructors in other departments who require a lot of writing are anticipating overcrowded office hours. Students in the basic skills program and ESL lab will wait and wait and wait for tutoring assistance, and group labs will be cancelled when tutors are absent. The basic skills instructor and Writing Center director will be more hands-on than ever, instructing significantly more in the lab and online in addition to our coordinative and supervisory duties. In collaboration with Stanford University's Education Program for Gifted Youth, the Cabrillo Writing Center has developed an online grammar lab this summer in an attempt to siphon off 150 students from our face-to-face group labs. (The aim is to reduce some of the daily demand on tutors and replace cancelled evening groups.)

Despite a slight increase in California community college student fees from \$11 to \$18 per unit, enrollment is still up at Cabrillo, and the new online grammar lab at the Writing Center is speedily filling. We hold our collective breath, dreading next year's budget cuts, with no idea what the real-life costs will be to the staff who are losing jobs and the students who are losing services. The

clock has been set back at least ten years as the gains we've made at the Writing Center in providing skilled tutoring, comfortable space, and essential writing tools and resources for all Cabrillo students have all been dealt a severe blow.

While we are a little budget-war-weary at Cabrillo, we are not without hope. Many of our Writing Center students face incalculable challenges in coming to college at all, and with them as our inspiration we'll simply have to do the best we can. We can only hope that we at the Writing Center, at Cabrillo, and in California can make sound and fair decisions about cuts while encouraging innovation and creativity in serving our very diverse (and always interesting) students.

Diane Putnam is the **Writing Center** Director and **Department of English** Program Chair at **Cabrillo College**.

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Writing Consulting in the Wild

Fall 2003 / Columns

by *Michael Erard*

Former university writing consultant Michael Erard has made a living as a writer and writing consultant outside the university. He shares his wisdom about the challenges and advantages of consulting in the wild.



Michael Erard

You don't need to be in a university-based writing center to do the writer-centered, process-positive, and culture-sensitive work of a writing consultant.

In fact, that work gets more interesting—and more crucial—in the wild.

Outside of organizations, you can find—or make—business opportunities as a freelance editor or a writing coach and social opportunities as a person who manages writing groups or creates writing workshops for social groups. Inside organizations you can enhance your job as an editor, a proposal writer, or even a supervisor by helping writers be more effective in their writing contexts, improve their relationships with texts, and reflect on their identities as writers.

I've worked as a writing consultant on both sides of the fence. In almost five years at the Undergraduate Writing Center at the University of Texas at Austin, I once calculated that I worked with 1000 students. After I finished my doctorate, I co-founded a writing consulting company, LucidWork, whose clients are salespeople, engineers, professors, and urban planners. Now, as an editor at the School of Nursing at UT-Austin, I edit grant proposals and research articles and hold writing skills seminars for faculty members and staff. I don't only work with texts; I work with writers. Writing is not only what's on the page, I believe: it's what's in the brain as well as in the work setting. What's on the page is often only an excuse for talking about brains and work settings.

Along the way I've come to believe that writing consultants are more effective than editors. An editor is a judge. An editor deals in issues of law, helping a writer produce good writing according to a set of principles abstracted from particular settings. On the other hand, a writing consultant is a mini-

anthropologist who understands that rules about “good” writing have a history within the culture of a profession, a company, or a community. The work of a writing consultant is to help a writer see and negotiate the *full* cluster of constraints that shape a text. Those constraints include genre, topic, purpose, and audience, but also the more unfamiliar but no less real factors of time pressures, the specific history of interactions with the people who will be evaluating and using the text, and the work that the piece of writing will have to do.

In the university setting, writing consulting work is relatively easy because even though many people disagree on what constitutes good writing, nearly everyone agrees that good writing matters.

When you work in the wild, you realize that the situation is nearly the opposite: most people agree that good writing follows a uniform set of simple, universal rules, but they’re not all willing to invest time and money in teaching those rules. There are a couple reasons for this. I have met some decision makers in companies who have, from time to time, hired an English professor to teach a grammar class—but found in several weeks that the staff’s writing is still unsatisfactory. That makes them believe that any investment in teaching provides no tangible return.

The even greater problem is that the world runs on bad writing. Why should someone spend time, energy, and financial resources improving writing when the competitive advantage that better writing provides is negligible? After all, the world doesn’t grind to a halt because of a cliché, unclear expression, poor word choice, flat phrase, or dishonest structure. It’s even possible that bad writing sometimes *improves* relationships because it gives supervisors something to supervise and doesn’t intimidate colleagues.

So the first task of the writing consultant in the wild is to uncover the real expectations for writing in a particular context. You can’t assume they rest on something as tangible as a grade. In the wild, writing is evaluated by intangible criteria like social status, perceived efficiency, and relative advantage. When a manager tries to talk about these things, he or she will inevitably translate the intangibles into tangibles, so that you begin to think the office they run is actually a classroom. I’ve met more than one supervisor who takes on a school-marmish tone because they lack the language for describing the work culture of writing.

What favors a writing consultant over an editor is flexibility, which means that if you want to work as a writing consultant in the wild, you will be able to uncover the real expectations for writing in any setting, whether the writers are a group of senior citizens who want to write their memoirs, sales staff for a computer firm, or middle-aged assistant professors.

Michael Erard is an editor, writer, and writing consultant. He can be reached at erard@lucidwork.com.

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From the Editors

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by the Praxis Editorial Collective

Welcome to *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*. We are a new publication devoted to the interests of writing consultants: labor issues, writing center news, training, consultant initiatives, and scholarship.

Because this is a publication whose first issue's theme is "Who We Are," introductions are in order. We are *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*, a new publication devoted to the interests of writing consultants: labor issues, writing center news, training, consultant initiatives, and scholarship. The journal is edited by graduate and undergraduate consultants at the Undergraduate Writing Center at the University of Texas at Austin, but we aspire to provide a forum for the voices and concerns of writing center practitioners across the country. So the "we" in "Who We Are" represents writing center consultants in high schools, institutions of higher education, and communities everywhere.

Our title, the Greek word *praxis*, is typically translated as "practice," which for writing center consultants denotes both our work with writers and the training we do to prepare for it. Praxis resonates all the more because it connotes practice inextricably entwined with theory—the daily concerns of writing center practitioners. The term, championed by both ancient Greek and contemporary rhetoricians, makes explicit our connection with the field of rhetoric, the basis for much of how we think about writing.

"Who We Are" is a meditation on the different identities of writing center practitioners. Since there is no "we" without a writing center, this issue's feature article focuses on the effects of the higher education financial crisis on writing centers. In addition to threatening consultant hiring rates, budget cuts are affecting how consultants define their positions: whether paid consultants face reduced hours, replacement by volunteers, or changes in working conditions generally. Providing a more personal perspective, Diane Putnam's column describes how the budget cuts are affecting consultants at Cabrillo Community College in California.

Who we are is shaped by what we call ourselves (and vice versa), and three writing center practitioners—Jon-Carlos Evans from Webster University in St. Louis, Missouri; Haeli Colina from Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas; and Judith Rosenberg formerly of SUNY Albany—weigh in on the differences between *coaches*, *consultants*, and *tutors*. Even if it sometimes remains unspoken, writing center practitioners are also rhetoricians, and Kristin Cole takes us down the Yellow Brick Road of rhetoric in the writing consultation. All of these titles refer to the professionalization of writing center work, which can open doors to other careers. We've asked Julie Garbus, director of the Northern Colorado Writing Center, and Michael Erard, freelance writer and writing consultant, to share their experiences as professionals inside and

outside academic settings. Career paths such as these have been fostered by the pioneers of the writing center community, and none have had a greater impact than Dr. Lady Falls Brown of Texas Tech University; on the occasion of Dr. Falls Brown's retirement, Elizabeth Piedmont Martin reflects on her contributions.

Readers of *Praxis* can also expect regular discussions highlighting writing centers in action. In this issue, **News** features writing center initiatives from the Sam Houston State University Writing Center and the Salt Lake Community College Community Writing Center. In the **Training** section Shelley Powers offers a nuts-and-bolts guide to technical writing. And in **Consulting** we spotlight the Write Place at St. Cloud State University in St. Cloud, Minnesota, and our featured consultant, Monica Jacobe, from the American University Writing Center in Washington, D.C. And all your grammar questions will be answered in **Columns** by our fearsome Merciless Grammarian.

Though our home base is UT, we aspire to apply the same collaborative practices of a writing consultation to the journal and welcome participation and input from consultants of all stripes in all locations. We invite feedback on these issues, either in the form of letters to the editors or articles written in response to those found here. Our spring issue will focus on training writing center practitioners, both practically and theoretically. We are also particularly interested in people's budget stories: Have budget cuts affected your center or your consulting work? How is your center responding? Also, if you'd like your center or one of your consultants to be featured in an upcoming edition, please contact us at praxis@uwc.fac.utexas.edu.

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Meeting Them Half Way: My Life as a Teacher, Tutor, Consultant

[Fall 2003 / Consulting](#)

by *Judith Rosenberg*

By the time I arrived at the University of Texas Undergraduate Writing Center, I had already worked on writing with adult education students—at a Brooklyn community center—and with undergraduates at the State University of New York at Albany. My titles had been *teacher* and *tutor*, respectively. Then it became *consultant* at UT, and I began to think about the tone the title gives to everyone's expectations—my own, as well as the students'.

Tutor and *teacher* are more familiar and therefore reassuring but not always or equally. The titles carry both productive and unproductive connotations of authority—productive when writers take the terms to mean a knowledgeable collaborator and unproductive when they believe only remedial writers need to seek out an authority who should fix and judge their work. But because our education systems offer students few models for how one-on-one collaboration works, each tutoring session involves negotiating the writer's and tutor's expectations. Since most students see a tutor as an experienced writer who is ready to give them her attention, calling myself a tutor made that negotiation easier. However, in each place where I helped people with their writing, the title helped or hurt, but the political environment influenced the relationship decisively.

Adult education was the most volatile situation. In the late 80s and early 90s I was teaching in minority communities in Brooklyn while Congress was dismantling welfare and changing adult education into job readiness programs. Students sometimes saw me as a social service provider since I did in fact, act as a gatekeeper for public assistance funds.

When I moved to Albany to start graduate school at the State University and began tutoring writers, I missed the small Brooklyn classrooms; they had become a community, but I was also relieved to not be *the teacher* any more. At Albany I again encountered students from the inner city, many of them from Brooklyn and children of the population I had met in adult education. Many of them were the first in their families to go to college. Now I was a different kind of gatekeeper. As a tutor I was a native guide to a bachelor's degree. When students came into the writing center, which they may have called the "tutoring center," they were full of excitement about being in college, expectant about what it would mean for their identities and futures. They understood writing as a skill they needed and were happy to find a helper who could spend time with them.

My title, *tutor*, suggested that I was on their side, not judging and undermining, but just there to give tips, take an interest in their college career and meet them half way. Pretty soon, though, I passed through the honeymoon phase of

tutoring. The writers and I didn't always have the same ideas about what we might work on together, or whether it is possible to transfer skills from one person to another, or how that could be done. They wanted me to be a language consultant, a walking thesaurus. They might be willing to negotiate problems of diction or grammar but that was the limit. Other times they wanted me to "fix it" and give their writing some quality that neither of us could describe. They grew suspicious if I gave feedback on structure or clarity. In this new phase of tutoring I returned to some of my minimalist habits from the Brooklyn classroom. I asked questions; I stood back and waited. I tried to discern what they wanted versus what they were ready for.

Judith Rosenberg is a writing consultant at the Undergraduate Writing Center at the University of Texas at Austin and a doctoral candidate in English.

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Into Their Own Hands: A Decidedly “Consultant” Philosophy

Fall 2003 / Consulting

by Haeli Colina

It is my third cup of coffee for the night, and my fifth consultation. She is a senior, first-timer, dangling her graduate school application essays in front of her and raising an eyebrow at me, her unexpectedly younger “tutor.” “Consultant,” I say, trying to sound casual but hoping she’ll tune into the importance of the difference. It is something we strive to promote in the writing center, a little word with a big ideology. I explain the way things generally run during a consultation: she tells me what should be my focus for workshoping, I read the paper silently or she reads it out loud, and then we work through the paper together, paying special attention to elements that concern her. She is surprised that I ask her to decide the focus of the session and stares at the paper mumbling “Well, *everything*” before her eyes catch on something familiar in the paragraphs, and she begins to remember—something she was wondering about her organization, something about her conclusion, something about citation. Her manner changes, and the pages she had half-tossed at me as she sat down she now gathers back into her own hands, pointing to particular sentences and thumbing ahead to find a problematic section. Her voice is steadier than before, and she leans forward in the chair as she explains what she wants her paper to accomplish. She is beginning to accept control of the work that she had been prepared to drop off at the door, and as we discuss possibilities, she will adopt or improve on some of my suggestions and disregard others without feeling any guilt or fear.

This is why I choose to call myself a consultant. My work with other students is not remedial. I do not have all the right answers or the best ideas and I do not put myself in a position of transmitting privileged knowledge. I have not attended my clients’ classes; I have not read their books; I do not know their professors or their professors’ expectations, and I do not, cannot, and should not accept responsibility for “fixing” their papers. What I can do is ask questions that will make them think differently about their writing process in general and their papers in particular. What I can do is listen to them talk their way into excellent outlines and take notes for them. What I can do is show them how much they have already done and how much more they still have waiting to spill out onto the page. Hopefully, students who bring their papers to the writing center will leave with renewed confidence in their own capabilities as thinkers and writers. It is only when student writers assume this central role in their consultations that they can truly be proud of the final products and claim them with all honesty as *their* work.

Haeli Colina is a senior writing consultant and religion major at Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas. She will be presenting at the IWCA-NCPTW Conference this October on a panel called "Trading Spaces: Looking Out and Looking in on the Challenges of the Writing Process."

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"So You're a Tutor, Right?"

Fall 2003 / Consulting

by *Jon-Carlos Evans*

Various people frequently raise one question to me in reference to my job at the Webster University Writing Center: "What do you do?" My response, "I'm a writing coach." A moment of uncomfortable silence ensues and then I'm usually met with a look of confusion, followed by an often insincere and forced expression of understanding. They then say, "So, you're a tutor, right?" Not exactly, but I often find myself complying for the safety of not having to explain myself. The time does arise, though, for all things to be revealed

Possibly, people outside of the Webster circle are thrown off by the term "coach." When one hears and applies the term "coach," it is unavoidably ascribed to the realm of sports. While what we do at the Webster University Writing Center is obviously not linked to sports, we embrace this term for a strong reason. Coaches are leaders, teachers, and possibly mentors, leading not necessarily by example but more by inspiration—the very philosophy behind our coaching methods. As coaches it is not our job to write papers for students or to simply tell them what is wrong and how to fix it. Instead, we ask questions, provide guidance and above all else investigate each student's writing process.

The only way to help anyone write is to find out both *how* and *why* they write. In the same manner that an athletic coach may determine his players' approach to their batting or shooting, we are also given the task of sizing up each writer's unique process. And this is done in a very simple, straightforward manner: asking questions. If we ask questions, paving the way for students to find their own answers, then the reward is much greater for them. They become endowed with a new understanding of how to approach their writing and how to make it more logical in their own minds. This is essentially the dominant function of coaching because most students do not have problems writing. Instead they have problems focusing and organizing their writing.

Students coming into the Writing Center merely for an editor find themselves sorely disappointed. Editors isolate themselves in a room with the writer's work armed with a knife and chisel, cutting the writing into shape. Theirs is a solitary task usually quite secluded from the writer. What a writing coach provides instead is a partnership. Coaches place themselves neither above nor below the student, but work with an individual to develop his or her writing.. Being a coach is more than proofreading; it's about expanding ideas, discussing what it is to write and what it is to write effectively. While as writing coaches we cannot show where the path ends and provide all the answers, we can show that the path isn't so perilous and that the answers are never out of reach.

Jon-Carlos Evans is a writing coach at Webster University in St. Louis, Missouri.

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Praxis takes you to The Write Place at St. Cloud State University.

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St. Cloud State University

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Opened

Fall 1968

Sponsor

English Department under the College of Fine Arts and Humanities

Consultations in 2002-2003

3200 (approximate)

Square footage

750 (approximate)

Services offered

- Peer tutoring in writing for undergraduate and graduate students across the disciplines.
- Individual work with faculty preparing written work for publication.

- Student workshops on a range of topics pertaining to academic writing.
- Faculty development workshops on topics such as writing to learn, and designing, responding to and evaluating writing assignments.
- Monthly reading series of works by writers from historically marginalized groups.
- Multicultural literary arts magazine featuring visual art, fiction, nonfiction, and poetry by St. Cloud State faculty and students.
- Collaboration with a range of student groups writing for social justice.
- Literacy Education Online (LEO) Web site: <http://leo.stcloudstate.edu/>

Staff

At least fifteen undergraduate and graduate tutors and interns. Undergraduates are paid by the hour; graduates receive tuition remission and a semesterly stipend. In recent years, some faculty have assisted with assessment and publishing projects.

Clientele

Writers at all levels of experience and ability. Last year The Write Place worked with an increasing number of graduate students composing theses and with faculty. Many undergraduate students come from writing-intensive courses in St. Cloud State's core curriculum such as Democratic Citizenship, Racial Issues, and Introduction to Rhetorical and Analytical Writing. Another large group is international students in ESL courses and upper-division courses across the disciplines.

Annual budget

\$10,000 for student salaries; \$230 for supplies (director's salary, TA stipends, space and maintenance funded by outside sources).

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Fall 2003 / Consultant Spotlight

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Monica Jacobe, a graduate consultant at the American University Writing Center, takes center stage.

Name: Monica F. Jacobe

Age: 25

Writing center: American University Writing Center, Washington, D.C.

School enrollment: Medium, but I have no idea . . . 15,000? It is the biggest school I have ever attended!

Year in school and area of study: Third-year MFA candidate, creative writing, prose.

Number of years working in writing centers: About five. I began work as an undergraduate consultant in the Writing Center at Emory & Henry College in Virginia.

Job title: We are consultants, not tutors, but always peers.

Describe the work you do in the writing center. With this being my third year in AU's Writing Center, I often work with some of the toughest clients, but my goal is always the same: help them learn to help themselves. Yes, I would love to give them the right answers, correct all the errors, and send them away smiling. However, the best job I can do for them is to listen, to learn from them, and help them learn through what we find during the session.

Describe the training you've participated in. Dr. Janet Auten, our director, trains all our consultants when they first start. We observe sessions, have a session as a client, and meet to talk about what we do every day. Training continues, however, even when you have been doing this for years. With each new group of consultants and with each new challenge from a client, I learn. Practice as training works better for me than theoretical reading, which I have done plenty of; when I see it inside a session, I say to myself "Oh, so that's how that works!"

How do you normally start a consultation? I always try to smile through the beginning, and I often find myself lowering my voice and saying as little as possible. I like to ask a general question and get the student talking about the class, the subject, and the paper at hand. I like to know all of this before diving into the actual words. A lot of students come in saying "I have bad grammar. Fix it." or "I can't write." I never believe those things, and if I listen beneath the basics, the real worries and the real work do come up. Nine times out of ten, the paper proves to me that listening like that can work.

Describe your consulting style. I think you can tell: I am a listener. Standing

back and refusing to be directive (something many students would love) forces the client to take control of the session. I can't tell them what to do, what I want, or how I would do it. I can only tell them what I see and what might help to better communicate the real point.

My favorite kind of consultation is . . . brainstorming! Who does love to throw ideas around and dream up a paper? So much more fun than the muddy work of murky, digressive writing!

My greatest strength as a consultant is . . . my ability to read the client. Some students come in and need reassurance, while others need to be forced to see their writing through new eyes, and still others need direction. While I am always non-directive me, I always adapt to respond to them; each session, like each client, must be individual. Sadly, there is no formula for this work.

My greatest weakness is . . . that sometimes I want to be the teacher that I am. I also teach College Writing at AU, and now that I have my own students, I have to resist taking the teacher role in the peer setting. I try very hard, and it usually works. The Writing Center has helped make me a responsive teacher who really communicates about what a paper should and shouldn't be. Thanks to my tutoring work, I know the language to use to talk about student writing with students.

What I like about working in a writing center is . . . the people I work with who are as crazy about writing, both its beauty and its technical side, as I am.

What I don't like is . . . feeling exhausted at the end of a session and knowing I have to do just as well and work just as hard for the next client. It is a regular struggle.

My oddest consultation was . . . an adult graduate student who showed up smelling of lunchtime martinis and wanted to doze off in the session while I "fixed" his paper. Not having noticed his condition until after we started, I finished the session, forcing him to work by asking endless questions about his meaning with this or that phrase and the appropriateness of this term in his field, etc.

What advice would you give to beginning consultants? Try the other side of the table after you get your feet wet. If you can see the session from both sides, you are more likely to be able to listen and help the client---and fuse their language about papers with your language about papers.

What kind of writing do you do? I write creative prose, both fiction and nonfiction, as well as critical articles and academic papers. My master's thesis is titled *What My Mother Left Me: A Memoir*, which looks into the corners of growing up without a mother from a young age as I did. My academic work focuses on American literature these days, but I used to be a daily news reporter and still write grant proposals and marketing memos for my real, paying job. Wait--do comments on student papers count? I write long comments because I think they deserve them.

How has working in a writing center affected the way you write? It has made me more conscious of language, meaning the way I put words together in everything I do. It has also made me feel good when I revise and guilty when I don't.

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Consulting with Technical Writers

[Fall 2003 / Training](#)

by *Shelley Powers*

Consulting on technical writing projects can make liberal arts-trained writing consultants nervous. However, technical writing is more familiar territory than we might think.

Students in the University of Texas at Austin's Electrical Engineering program sell t-shirts with the slogan "Get a real major" emblazoned on the back. That t-shirt means "We do our thing over here, and you do yours over there. You don't quantify; we do. We can prove that we have the right answer; you're hard pressed to pull that off. You don't know what I'm talking about, and I don't get you either. Please just leave me here safe." Writing consultants—especially those from humanities backgrounds—run headlong into this sentiment. The simplest and most helpful thing we can do to address it is to adapt a little. Sure, we may not be comfortable handing down The Law about language. But we can give clear guidelines that will keep the "grammar grader" from ticking three more points for mechanics from the writer's paper. We can work within the style and format guides stipulated by the writer's instructor regardless of how wacky they may appear. We can offer suggestions to make writing as rational as possible—and that is exactly what we ought to do to help writers produce good technical writing.

The following pointers relate to aspects of technical writing you are likely to encounter in consultation.

Required Materials:

A. The Entire Group

In Engineering and other places, group lab work is common. These groups often produce their written results by assigning sections of the work to different people and then giving one person the task of knitting the bits together. When we consult with only one person from the group (as is often the case), we're consulting with the knitter. For obvious reasons, this is not ideal. How effective is it to address the ESL problems of the results section writer with a knitter who's a native-speaker? Not very. If you are faced with a lone representative, invite the whole group to return to the writing center for a collective consultation.

B. The Assignment /Format /Style Guide

An engineering assignment can vary from a lab report to a memo to a formal email, but it will almost always contain a set structure and a very specific listing of points to address. Without the assignment, you're in a bad position to evaluate content. Similarly, the writer must know the style she is supposed to follow. IEEE style is very different from ASME, and they're both worlds away from MLA. Each discipline's conventions have developed over time to reflect the most common uses of its documents. Neither you nor the writer can be

expected to figure out the style logically. Having the assignment sheet and a format or style guide handy is crucial.

Aspects of the Whole Paper to Address:

A. Purpose

Technical writing almost always imparts information in an objective manner. The writer should be able to tell you, in one sentence, what the writing is supposed to do. If the writer looks at you blankly when you ask for a statement of purpose, start there. Ask what information the paper includes, how the writer came upon the information, and whether the focus is on the process of acquiring the information or the information itself.

B. Audience

As with purpose, the writer should be able to identify who his or her audience is. Often, in engineering technical writing courses, students are instructed to write for an "educated non-technical audience." In lab courses, however, the student is to write for the TA or the instructor—a technical audience. Then there's the hybrid situation: the student writes for both a "grammar grader" and a "technical grader" whose grades together make up the student's final grade. When a writer is in the split-grading situation, ask the student if he can get the rubric the grammar grader uses to evaluate the papers. The "grammar grader" label is misleading. Concerns we might consider grammatical—pronoun reference, say—make up only a portion of what the grammar grader evaluates. Students may not know this, so they may be unnaturally obsessed with modifiers. It's good to help them look at organization and logic, too. The student will feel less mystified by the grammar grade, and you will have some sense of the global concerns in the writing.

C. Clarity

In technical writing, clarity often means getting into the data as quickly as possible. It also means adhering to the appropriate style. Since these two things are particular to each writing situation, I can only mention some red flags. (1) If the writer uses a lot of negative constructions, he or she weakens the reader's confidence in his or her results. Instead of "the software is improperly installed when ...," the writer should try "the software is properly installed when ..." (2). Since ambiguity in engineering can have costly or even fatal consequences (space probes missing entire planets, bridges collapsing, and so forth), pronouns can be very dangerous in technical writing. Repetition of nouns to avoid ambiguous pronoun references is often a better idea by far. However, personal pronouns are okay, and for the same reasons valued in other aspects of technical writing—clarity and simplicity. (3) Headings ought to be descriptive. Think of an instruction manual. The reader wants to be able to find the section on how to assemble Part A. (4) Technical writing sentences and paragraphs are short. A technical paper often has a lot of white space and Spartan transitions. That's good. The point is the data, not verbiage. (5) Watch the emphasis: if one chart takes up a third of a page and the next one takes up three-quarters of a page, and they're both of similar complexity, the writer's trying to take the reader's suspicious eyeballs off the first chart. It won't work. Similarly, biased word choices won't work. Remind students that the grader will look for the numbers, and that they can't hide them with writing and graphic design. Bad facts often fail.

D. Counterintuitive Grammar

Most style manuals treat grammatical conventions in some detail. But here are

a few things to know. First, passive voice is not always bad. When a technical writer is describing equipment or materials, he or she can use the passive voice in most cases. Be sure to ask the writer how the evaluators feel about passive voice before you head for the handout. It might be okay. Second, don't get too scared about tense. Most technical writing has clear tense demands because it describes a sequence of events or actions. Outside that, just help the writer make sure the tense stays consistent within each section.

Specific Features and Kinds of Technical Writing

A. Sectional Independence

Like research papers in the natural sciences, engineering reports are typically divided into sections, including an abstract followed by an introduction, a results section summarizing important findings, recommendations for further action (if applicable), and discussion of results. All sections should be readable in isolation. Think of the last time you assembled something. Probably, you only went for the manual when Part A wouldn't stop blinking and Tab C was not at all aligned with Slot D. You didn't want to read a lengthy description of Part A. Readers of technical writing tend to want certain information at certain times. In technical papers, this means that the abstract, the introduction, the discussion, and the conclusion will probably be the most-read sections. In the context of a course, the discussion section is where the grader will try to divine whether the writer learned anything about the experiment. So, after you've knocked these sections out, go back to the statement of purpose. If the process of gathering the data is important, the account of the experiment (or whatever) is key. If the data itself is important, the results section is key.

B. Description of Mechanism

This is a wacky task that technical writers face. They'll describe the constituent elements of a mechanism, then describe the mechanism as a whole, then describe how it works. You can help them evaluate the effectiveness of this writing by trying to picture the mechanism. If you can get a sense of how it fits together in space, the writing works.

C. Instructions and Bulleted Lists

Both instructions and bulleted lists involve series of parallel items. Some instructors hate bulleted lists. Beware! If the writer needs to produce instructions or a bulleted list, however, you can help in a few basic ways. First, check for faulty parallelism and help the writer fix it. That skill alone will carry most writers through bulleted lists.

Truly silly things can happen with instructions if readers take them literally. I once had a group of students try to inflate a pool toy using another group's written instructions. The writers had forgotten to mention the location of the inflation spout, and the pool toy stayed flat. Two things can help avoid flat pool toys: consistent naming and thorough lists of materials. Make sure all the objects have the same name every time they're mentioned. Ask the writer if the person following the instructions needs any tools, or should get any specific warnings. Discuss the polite-but-firm use of the imperative mood in warnings.

Scary Moments:

A. Evaluation and Copy Editing

Because of the mystique that often surrounds the "grammar grade" in technical writing courses, students can believe that one dangling modifier will bust them down to a C. That's often why students regard writing centers as a copy-editing

service. Also, technical writers with the quantitative habit of mind can often be more comfortable with rules to apply rather than more nebulous directions. I suggest giving the writer the rules. Explain the grammar. Just let the writer know that the job of applying it consistently through the paper is his or hers.

B. ESL and unfamiliar terms

If a writer has trouble using articles, say, and is describing the parts that make up an overhead cam engine, some of us may not know what articles go with the unfamiliar nouns. This is a perfect time to teach grammar rules. Most ESL technical writers can appreciate that teaching them rules is all you can do. They know you don't know the technical terms. If you are especially nervous, though, see if the writer is a member of a study group. If so, he or she can pick out a few tricky terms and get the proper articles from a native-speaker friend.

C. Pompous Voice and "Borrowed" Text

Technical writers early in their writing careers can contort themselves into something I like to call "pompous voice." The symptoms are slightly misused words that sound impressive, clause-pile sentences, and lengthy or supposedly humorous transitions. I once saw an essay on robotics that made the transition from the description of mechanism to the results section using lyrics from Styx's "Mr. Roboto." It was cute, maybe, but also unprofessional and imprecise. Explain to the writer that technical writing is not about showboating (okay, okay, use a nicer word) but about presenting data. Ask them to restate lengthy sections in one sentence and write the sentence down for them. Ask them to explain "pompous voice" sections to you as though you were a seventh-grader. Try underlining biased word choices.

Pompous voice is often related to the problem of "borrowed" text. We all know what this looks like—one paragraph sounds like an engineering student and the next sounds like a manufacturer's website. Let the writer know that you sense something fishy. You'll find out that either the writer does not understand proper citation (do not buy any stories about different intellectual property standards in technical writing), or that the writer thought no one would notice. All you can do in this situation is notice, and notice pointedly.

Technical writers operate under different demands, yes, but they face many of the same writing troubles as the rest of us. They are trained to use a spelled-out style and often appreciate spelled-out advice on language. Like the rest of us, they want to learn the methods so they can apply them independently. For the most part, they want tools. We can give those to them.

Shelley Powers is a PhD student in the American Studies program at the University of Texas at Austin.

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Did You Know You're a Rhetorician?

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by *Kristin Cole and Sue Mendelsohn*

Using rhetoric in writing consultations.

Using rhetoric in writing consultations may leave consultants feeling like Dorothy lost in the Land of Oz. Before we study rhetoric, its foreign terms and fancy theorists -- *kairos* and Toulmin and *ethos*, oh my! -- lurk in a dark forest. Evil witches and monkeys jump out, blocking our paths home to the more familiar territory of the English major: discussing the writing process and flow, organization and transitions. If you've never explored the Land of Rhetoric before, join me for a stroll down the Yellow Brick Road. While our walk may feel new and frightening at first, like Dorothy, you'll find your way back home, wiser for having undertaken the journey.

If you thought rhetoric was the Wicked Witch of the West, I couldn't blame you. Popular culture levels a decisive blow against embracing the term. In newspapers, the word typically carries a negative connotation; mud-slinging politicians claim their opponents are "full of rhetoric." Yet, when it denotes a field of study, rhetoric is a powerful set of ideas that spans from the ancient Greeks to contemporary comedians.

Rhetoric is, to put it very simply, both the study of argumentation and argumentation itself. Writers and writing consultants are rhetoricians because we all craft arguments to convey our ideas. Additionally, whether we know it or not, consultants are teachers of rhetoric; we show writers how they can find the heart, the brains, and the nerve to navigate through the Oz of writing using the tools of rhetoric.

So why should we bother learning yet another unfamiliar set of concepts? One good answer is that when we're asked to consult outside our areas of expertise it's the common language of rhetoric that can help us get at the root of a writer's concerns across any discipline.

Let's consider the case of Joe bringing in a biology lab report on monkey pox in prairie dogs for help drafting his introduction and conclusion. Right about now, you, the consultant, are regretting your decision to test out of freshman biology. Glenda the Good Witch won't save you, but rhetoric is here to help. Consider a few concepts that may allow you to connect with Joe on his unfamiliar topic.

- *Kairos*: Joe is having trouble explaining why monkey pox is a worthy subject of study. You can introduce the notion of *kairos* -- a consideration of how the circumstance and social context in which the rhetoric will be heard changes the way it's received -- to help him situate his findings. For instance, what are the circumstances surrounding monkey pox today? It's a disease spreading from prairie dogs to humans, therefore, research into the disease is particularly

pertinent for human health right now.

- *Audience-identification* and *warrant*: Joe's conclusion criticizes the Democratic Party for cutting monkey pox research funding. How can you suggest this is not the most effective strategy without appearing to be speaking from personal bias? One rhetorical theorist, Kenneth Burke, asks rhetoricians to focus on identifying with audiences rather than persuading them. This shift emphasizes collaboration with readers, building on shared understanding rather than winning a debate. Another rhetorician, Stephen Toulmin, called this shared understanding a warrant. You might ask Joe to consider both his professor's expectations for a lab report and his professor's political stance on monkey pox research funding. If the professor doesn't expect to see partisan opinions in a lab report or if she is a staunch democrat, will she identify with Joe's criticism? Identification helps a writer distinguish his relationship to his audience as collaborative rather than exclusively persuasive.

- *Ethos*: You could also address Joe's political stance by discussing *ethos*: the writer's reputation or credibility. Any writer understands that credibility is essential to getting your message heard. Joe's rhetoric won't be effective if he doesn't convince his reader that he understands the conventions of a lab report, which exclude political fist pounding.

Let us return to Oz, for a moment. Once Dorothy and her friends reach the Land of Oz, the Wizard pulls awards for the Lion, the Scarecrow, and the Tin Man out of his bag. Dorothy says, "I don't think there's anything in your black bag for me." And there wasn't, but as Glenda teaches her she had the power to go home all along. Rhetoric isn't a magical tool we keep in our black bags. On the contrary, once we understand it, we may discover that it provides the language for tools we've had all along. This new wisdom allows us to come home with a new insight into the familiar things we've always known; coming home to rhetoric allows us to make writers feel at home there too.

Kristin Cole and Sue Mendelsohn are graduate students in the English Department and consultants in the Undergraduate Writing Center at the University of Texas at Austin.

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Fall 2003 / The Merciless Grammarian

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The Merciless Grammarian spews his wrath on nasty problems of grammar, mechanics, and style.



Drawing by Nathan Baran

Dear Merciless One,

Over the last several years, I've noticed signs that our language is slipping into a shallow grave. Take capitalization for instance. On my daughter's high school proficiency exam, the test writers didn't seem to know a proper noun when they saw one. Here's one practice sentence that my daughter was supposed to correct: "When she's nervous, my aunt Martha tends to chew other people's fingernails." I was always taught titles like *mother*, *sister*, and *aunt* were capitalized when used in place of people's names and not capitalized after a possessive like *my*, *your*, or *his*. Here are some examples: "I chewed fingernails with Aunt Martha," or " My aunt Martha chewed fingernails with me." But the test makers say the answer to the practice sentence is as follows: "When she's nervous, my Aunt Martha tends to chew other people's fingernails." If I may slip into my ten-year-old daughter's roguish vernacular, "What is up with that?" Isn't this wrong?

Sincerely,
Corpus Delicti

Dear Corpus,

It would give me great pleasure to bury these standardized philistines and language undertakers. But be wary lest you find yourself grubbing in the dirt as well: the truth in such matters is more ambiguous than it appears at first blush.

In the absence of possessive modifiers like *my*, *your*, or *his*, the kinship name (*Aunt*) and the first name (*Martha*) stand in for the person's full name (*Martha Grubb*), becoming a proper noun. If you say something like "I inherited my taste in dadaist art from Mother," *Mother* is capitalized because it stands in for her proper name and refers only to one particular person. If you say "My mother doesn't abide her cheeky, know-it-all-son," on the other hand, *mother* is already "particularized" by the modifier *my* (you don't have any other mothers floating around out there, do you?). In this case, *mother* by itself does not stand in for her name -- the whole expression "My mother" does.

The "rule" for such capitalization appears somewhat ambiguous, however, even in that

holiest of holies, *The Chicago Manual of Style*: "Kinship names are lowercased when preceded by modifiers. When used before a proper name or alone, in place of the name, they are *usually* capitalized." (Argh! Equivocators!) So, as painful as it is to utter these words, I must: it appears that you must make a rhetorical choice. Do you wish to emphasize the kin name as part of a proper noun or do you wish to downplay the kin name in deference to the possessive modifier? (This decision may be based on what Mother and Aunt Martha have been up to lately.) Autonomy, I loathe thee.

Begrudgingly,
The Merciless One

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We welcome articles from writing center consultants and administrators related to training, consulting, labor issues, administration, and writing center news, initiatives, and scholarship. For information about submitting an article or suggesting an idea, please refer to our [submissions page](#).

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