Report from the Field

In Their Own Words: How Peer Tutors Can Foster Critical Thinking, Dialogue, and Connection in a WAC Program

Natalie DeVaull-Robichaud
Albertus Magnus College

As Joan A. Mullin (2011) noted in "Writing Centers and WAC," partnerships between the writing center and faculty can create a feedback "loop" (p. 185) that builds dialogue between faculty and students and helps foster a flourishing learning environment in a Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program. Promoting these connections can require innovative approaches since, as writing program administrator (WPA) Heather Bastian (2014) observed, "this kind of work is ongoing, a cyclical process of establishing relations, reinforcing relations, and building new relations" ("Invest," para. 1). One approach that has been useful to our WAC program at Albertus Magnus College is a tutoring form, like a report, developed initially to inform faculty about students' visits to the writing center, but which evolved into a more dynamic form to encourage communication and critical thinking. This form, which peer tutors complete after each tutoring session, encourages tutors, faculty, and the WPA to think more critically about the relationship between writing and the WAC program at this small institution. The peer tutors complete these Writing Process/Visit Verification (WPVV) forms (see Appendix), using the language of the writing process to describe their sessions, and then the WPVV forms are shared with each student-client's professor within two days of the appointment, communicating the WAC program's approach to process across disciplinary boundaries. In addition, the WPVV forms offer the WPA insight into individual tutoring sessions, an opportunity to gather data on tutoring sessions, and a chance to use language to build community within the learning environment of the writing center. Most significantly, the WPVV form provides opportunities for critical thinking and dialogue within the WAC program.

History

The WPVV form has evolved over time to convey writing program outcomes and critical thinking opportunities. When the WPVV form was first developed in 2004, it was intended to inform faculty, in an era before tutor tracking software, that a student had visited the writing center. Tutors would record a few details about the tutoring session, such as "worked on an outline" or "brainstormed." Faculty would glance at the forms to make sure that their students were going to the writing center, and many considered the forms little more than a rudimentary reporting system. (It should be noted that since the faculty had voted to integrate the writing center and the writing program, they accepted from the start of the initiative that they would receive these forms.) Further possibilities for the WPVV form became a consideration in 2011 with the development of formal writing program outcomes and the desire to show that individual writing center tutoring sessions aligned with these wider outcomes. The WPVV forms became a potential source for evidence that the tutoring sessions did in fact meet these wider goals, which included principles of organization, logic,

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citation, use of sources, and grammar. In redesigning the form for one of its many revisions, I added space for descriptions of sessions and specific higher and later order concerns that had been addressed. This made it possible to show the administration exactly how tutoring sessions support the goals of the WAC program—goals which dovetail with the college's broader general education outcomes. Because the peer tutors were already used to writing reports of their sessions, they were open to developing their responses. For the past four years, then, the WPVV forms have provided data showing that writing center sessions support WAC program outcomes. For instance, assessment data revealed in 2015 that during the 1,357 tutoring sessions for the academic year, the most time was spent on organizing paragraphs, citing sources, and helping with grammar and word choice, and the least time was spent helping student-clients find sources. This finding aligned with wider-scope assessments of the WAC program and helped me strategically plan training and professional development sessions for peer tutors. For example, because WPVV forms showed that the least amount of time was spent finding appropriate sources, the reference librarians and I held professional development sessions to help tutors improve their information literacy skills.

Faculty Responses

In attempting to gauge the extent to which the forms have helped the WAC program communicate to faculty its approach to writing, I can point to the results of the spring 2016 writing program survey in which faculty provided feedback on the forms. The survey asked faculty to rate the effectiveness of the forms, using a scale from 1–5, where 5 is considered highly effective and 1 is considered ineffective. Eight out of roughly 15 WAC program faculty responded to the voluntary survey. To the question "How well do the Visit Verification forms communicate the Writing Center's focus on higher order concerns (fulfilling the assignment, structure, organization, and citation), and later/lower order concerns (grammar, phrasing, punctuation)?" four responded with 5/5, three responded with 4/5, and one responded with 3/5. To the question "How well do the Visit Verification forms communicate the Writing Center's commitment to non-directive tutoring, which focuses on guiding, teaching, and helping?" five responded with 5/5 and three responded with 3/5. Finally, to the question "How well do Visit Verification forms communicate the Writing Center's focus on helping students learn to revise their own writing?" four responded 5/5 and four responded 4/5. The results suggest that while peer tutors are, on the whole, successful at communicating these concepts, there is definitely room for improvement, which can hopefully be addressed through training as well as professional development.

It has also been helpful to ask faculty for feedback on the forms, especially since the forms may undergo extensive revision. Robert Bourgeois, professor of anthropology, shared his thoughts on the forms with me, noting "Many WC comments by WA's have been cogent and have impressed me with their combination of analysis and 'teaching compassion'" (personal communication, July 16, 2017). Deborah Frattini, professor of English and humanities, shared a concern regarding the forms: "One issue is that those receiving them (faculty, adjunct faculty) change every semester, every year. Perhaps a statement at the beginning or end of the form about process would help remind student and professor of that reality (if they are unfamiliar with the concept of the 'Writing Process Approach')" (personal communication, July 12, 2017). Her helpful feedback, which I will work to address,

underscores the value of dialogue about WAC approaches as well the need to evolve the form in response to feedback.

I do want to add that faculty do not always read the forms. After all, during some semesters, a single faculty member could receive over a hundred of them. On the other hand, many faculty have informally told me that they do skim the forms even though they might not read them very closely. As a writing instructor myself, I believe that the forms reflect students' engagement with writing assignments and can be a helpful resource in a writing-to-learn classroom.

Critical Thinking and Writing

John C. Bean (2011) argued that students think critically when engaging with a problem (p. 4) and that "writing is both a process of doing critical thinking and a product communicating the results of critical thinking" (p. 3). He noted that faculty can encourage students to apply critical thinking skills through their writing, regardless of discipline, by asking themselves questions as they develop their assignments, such as "Is the writing interesting? Does it show a mind actively engaged with a problem? Does it bring something new to readers? Does it make an argument?" (p. 4). Students can build critical thinking skills by solving writing problems in collaborative pairs, which can, as Bean noted, "expand, develop, and deepen their thinking" (p. 5). Peer tutor Lauren Parisi underscored this idea of paired problem solving when she wrote: "When tutors break down and explain the problem and work closely with the client, I think it allows for the best possible problem solving. The client is engaged and learning, not just being talked at." Lauren explained that peer collaboration is an effective way to address writing problems and engage students: "When you work with a peer instead of a professor, it instantly makes it easier to relax and, therefore, be more receptive to learning. When you are working with a superior, you tend to be more self-conscious of your work. But with a peer, there is less stress for your work to be perfect because you know that they are still learning too" (personal communication, July 18, 2017).

In a good peer tutoring session, both peer tutor and student-client feel comfortable working together and having an honest conversation about writing, and their collaborations can be recorded on the WPVV forms so that faculty can see how students are progressing with their work to address writing challenges. Problems such as focusing on the topic, developing a thesis statement, finding appropriate supporting evidence, and analyzing that evidence can be collaboratively solved through conversation and trial and error that necessitates critical thought. Bean (2001) argued that this collaboration in pairs can "stretch their thinking" (p. 4). Likewise, in our 2017 annual anonymous survey of peer tutors, one tutor described the way she or he has a conversation to help clients solve writing challenges: "I talk to clients about what their assignment is about in order to begin a discussion. In my experience, clients usually know more about their given topic than they give themselves credit for. Once they actually begin talking about the assignment when prompted by questions, it is pretty easy to begin an outline" (survey response, April 2017). Since collaboration is the foundation of a beneficial tutoring session, students across disciplines can build critical thinking skills through working with peer tutors in the writing center, and their problem solving can be communicated to the faculty member through the WPVV forms.

Process

Chris M. Anson (2014) observed that process pedagogy is widely accepted by most composition programs as a way to "help students engage in their writing, to develop self-efficacy, confidence, and strategies for meeting the challenges of multiple writing situations" (p. 226). While most WPAs and writing instructors "buy into" the importance of process-oriented pedagogy, which is also implemented by many writing centers, not all disciplinary faculty perceive the benefits of multi-draft, multi-step writing assignments. John C. Bean (2001) noted that "writing instruction goes sour whenever writing is conceived primarily as a 'communication skill' rather than as a process and product of critical thought" (p . 3). A common challenge for many WPAs and writing center directors is to communicate the value of process-oriented tutoring to faculty. After all, while process pedagogy takes time and focus in a classroom, it enables students to produce writing that is more effective and polished than writing that was drafted the night before in a rush before the deadline. Bean wrote:

> In most kinds of courses, the student "product" that most exhibits the results of critical thinking is a formal essay or technical report. Often, however, what the student submits as a finished product is in effect an early draft, the result of an undeveloped and often sterile writing process. No matter how much we exhort students to write several drafts and to collaborate with peers, most of our students will continue to write their papers on the night before they are due unless we structure our courses to promote writing as a process. Teachers can get better final products, therefore, if they design their courses from the outset to combat last-minute writing, to promote exploratory writing and talking, and to encourage substantial revision. (p. 8)

In a writing center, students have the opportunity to collaborate with a peer during the revision process, and when faculty read about this process they can see in fact that cooperative revision significantly benefits student writing. Alternatively, some faculty members may expect that writing center-reviewed papers be perfect, so WPAs often need to explain another aspect to the process-versus-product approach—the fact that papers that come to the writing center and are undergoing the writing process are not perfect when they leave. Additional revision is often necessary.

As advocates for writing to learn, WPAs often need to communicate the necessity of the steps of the process and the imperfection of the writing that goes through the process. In "What is a Writing Center?" Neal Lerner (2013) explained that "the perspective of the Writing Center as a place of remediation where only surface-level errors are fixed is at odds with the WPA's and peer tutors' perspectives of the writing center as a place of individual instruction, collaboration and process" (p. 228). Over time, the WPVV forms can be used to help explain this process-focused approach to faculty and help address misconceptions that faculty may have about writing center tutoring. By describing the writing process, tutors can show faculty that the writing center's focus is process oriented. Further, the forms themselves can include language that briefly explains the process and the fact that papers are not expected to be perfect when they leave the writing center. Tutors tend to use the language of process. For example, in 2016, peer tutor Christine Puglisi wrote that her client "had a simple outline but we worked on expanding it in order to clarify her direction for the

last 5 pages. Finally we discussed a strong thesis. . . . I then suggested she try to get in one more appointment before the paper is due." In this description, Christine noted that she focused on organization and the thesis statement, two higher order concerns, communicating to the client's professor that the writing center prioritizes organization and "big picture concerns," and does not focus only on surface level errors. Christine makes it clear that there is a need for further revision before the paper is complete—the outline has been developed but the paper still needs to be written, and the peer tutor is hoping that she can meet again with her client after the essay is drafted. Christine is suggesting that further collaboration and discussion will help the client develop her draft just as it helped her build her outline. The fact that Christine and the client "discussed the thesis" also conveys a collaborative approach to solving a writing problem, which includes a dialogue about the nature and effectiveness of a thesis statement for the assignment. This language communicates the writing center's commitment to process, cooperation, and discussion, and it helps dispel the misconception that the writing center is a proofreading service or that writing tutors edit rather than collaborate.

WAC Connections

One advantage peer tutors can have over WPAs is that tutors often major in disciplines other than English and can sometimes more easily establish cross-disciplinary connections. Irene Clark (1999) contended that "[i]nterdisciplinary consultants thus serve as a bridge between the Writing Center and faculty members . . . and foster productive relationships between various facets of the . . . program" (p. 151). Because of this, like many WPAs, I seek out tutors from various disciplines who can act as what Johnston and Speck (1999) called an "ambassador plenipotentiary [who] 'negotiates treaties' with faculty interested in understanding and using writing" (p. 16). When faculty receive the WPVV forms, they can see that the tutors value the conventions of the discipline. For example, in a WPVV form for an experimental research methods course in 2017, peer tutor Shante Chatfield wrote:

> The research paper was organized with an abstract, title page and appropriate heads including methods, materials and procedures. We discussed her introduction and the sources she will use to describe in her paper. Throughout her paper, we discussed what important information regarding her study and the participants belonged in each section order to have a clear, organized research paper. We also went over citing articles and books in APA format within the paper. Minor corrections were made in sentence structure and punctuation.

Shante's conscientious focus on the structure of a research methods paper communicates to the faculty member that the writing center can in fact support students' writing in his or her particular discipline. Attention to disciplinary conventions, while requiring extensive training, shows faculty from different departments that the WAC program makes space for their discipline and is not merely an offshoot of the English department. (On the other hand, it should be noted that tutors' observance of individual faculty's preferences would understandably be difficult to manage at a larger institution.)

In addition to carefully addressing the language and conventions of disciplinary writing in WPVV forms, it is the continuous nature of the forms—the fact that faculty receive

them throughout the semester—that helps maintain connections across disciplinary boundaries. Since all full- and part-time faculty receive them, whether or not they teach a writing intensive class, the WPVV forms help develop dialogue by providing a springboard for conversation. For example, one part-time religion instructor called me up about the feedback he had received on a WPVV form, and it gave us an opportunity to have a brief dialogue about disciplinary writing, which would not have been possible otherwise, since our hours on campus did not align. Some of my faculty colleagues have asked about the amount of writing the peer tutors do on each form, and this gives me an opportunity to explain the writing program's process. Further, faculty often comment about the rhetorical choices the tutors make—for instance, they note the way the peer tutors work to keep a professional tone when describing a concern, which shows that tutors are developing rhetorical skills as they complete the forms. One faculty member called to say that the peer tutor had given him insight into what the student was struggling with and wanted me to thank that tutor. Of course, some faculty never comment about the forms, and some comments have not been positive. Once a faculty member mentioned that he thought it was funny that the tutors have so much to say about so little. As WPA, I took this as an opportunity to explain why we do what we do.

Benefits to Tutors

The WPVV forms can offer tutors metacognitive opportunities and encourage them to learn from each other to think critically about tutoring as well as audience. In training class, the tutors discuss higher and later order concerns and nondirective tutoring described by Paula Gillespie and Neal Lerner (2007) in *The Longman Guide for Peer Tutoring*. Reading WPVV forms in training class helps familiarize tutors-in-training with ways of describing these approaches; later, during supported tutoring sessions, a seasoned tutor collaborates with a new tutor to create joint WPVV forms. This practice unites the tutors with a common purpose and helps create what Etienne Wenger called "a community of practice" where "participants are able to recognize an experience of meaning in each other and to develop enough of shared sense of competence to do some mutual learning" (as cited in Geller, Eodice, Condon, & Boquet, 2013, p. 12). The peer tutors learn from each other how to use these forms to guide their tutoring sessions. Deborah Frattini, who helped develop the VV form, noted that "the VV form imposes a standard for Writing Associates and helps guide them through the student's work. Just as rubrics help keep faculty 'focused' on what and how to correct a paper and students on why and what was corrected, so too, VV forms ensure consistency in helping the student with his writing" (personal communication, July 14, 2017). Peer tutor Zoe Dudek underscored this when she described the forms as "a guide for my tutoring sessions. When I am meeting with a client, I always make certain to glance over the V.V. form before I end the session to make sure that all of the important elements of writing have been discussed. Sometimes I will realize that I have forgotten an important element that I have thoughts on to share with the client" (personal communication, September 27, 2016). Furthermore, because these forms have a varied but real audience, including faculty, the WPA, and new tutors, the peer tutors are faced with an authentic rhetorical experience that pushes them to use language to connect with the college community and to think critically about their writing choices. Liam Oliver, a peer tutor, noted: "Knowing that someone will read the V.V. forms makes me write in a way that I think other people will more easily follow" (personal communication, September 27, 2016). Tutors need to think critically about tone, word

choice, grammar, and their audience's expectations. For instance, in writing a form to a freshman composition instructor, the peer tutor would make a particular point to focus on thesis development and paragraph organization. Moreover, completing these forms provides peer tutors with metacognitive opportunities to think reflectively and critically about the effectiveness of their tutoring sessions and the ways they addressed writing center outcomes, which include the higher and lower order concerns. Last semester, one of my colleagues told me that if he sat down and wrote about each class he taught, he'd be a better teacher. Most instructors would probably agree, but who has the time? The tutors, however, are booked for an hour and therefore often do have the time, especially since sessions often end early. They are accustomed to setting aside ten minutes at the end of a session to reflect on the effectiveness of their collaboration with clients and their approaches to the session's specific writing problems. Thinking critically about their choices as tutors helps make tutors intentional learners and is one reason their collaborative skills improve over time, which is reflected in the feedback they receive on their student evaluations.

Caveats and Conclusion

Finally, a disclaimer—I do not mean to suggest that the peer tutors' forms solve the challenges of building connections in a WAC Program, because that certainly isn't the case, as with any single approach. The nature of WAC programs requires various approaches to building connectivity and dialogue, and the WPVV form is one way that has had promising results at a small college. Moreover, Albertus Magnus College has about five hundred traditional undergraduate students, so it is necessary to note that implementing a detailed written form may be a logistical challenge at a larger institution; however, given enough resources for training, it may be possible to apply this technique on a larger scale. Furthermore, while the forms do work well for some faculty at Albertus Magnus College, it is important to add that, as with all approaches we implement as WPAs, the forms do not work with *all* faculty. I also want to note that the popular tutor tracking software is much easier to implement than WPVV forms would be, and does convey helpful information to faculty about student visits and basic session focuses. On the other hand, while there are currently various ways to inform faculty that a student has come to a writing center appointment, and tutor tracking software is a popular method used for this purpose, detailed written feedback can be a helpful addition. In a WAC program at a small college, the WPVV forms have helped build and maintain communication within the college community and have encouraged peer tutors, faculty, and the WPA to think critically about writing.

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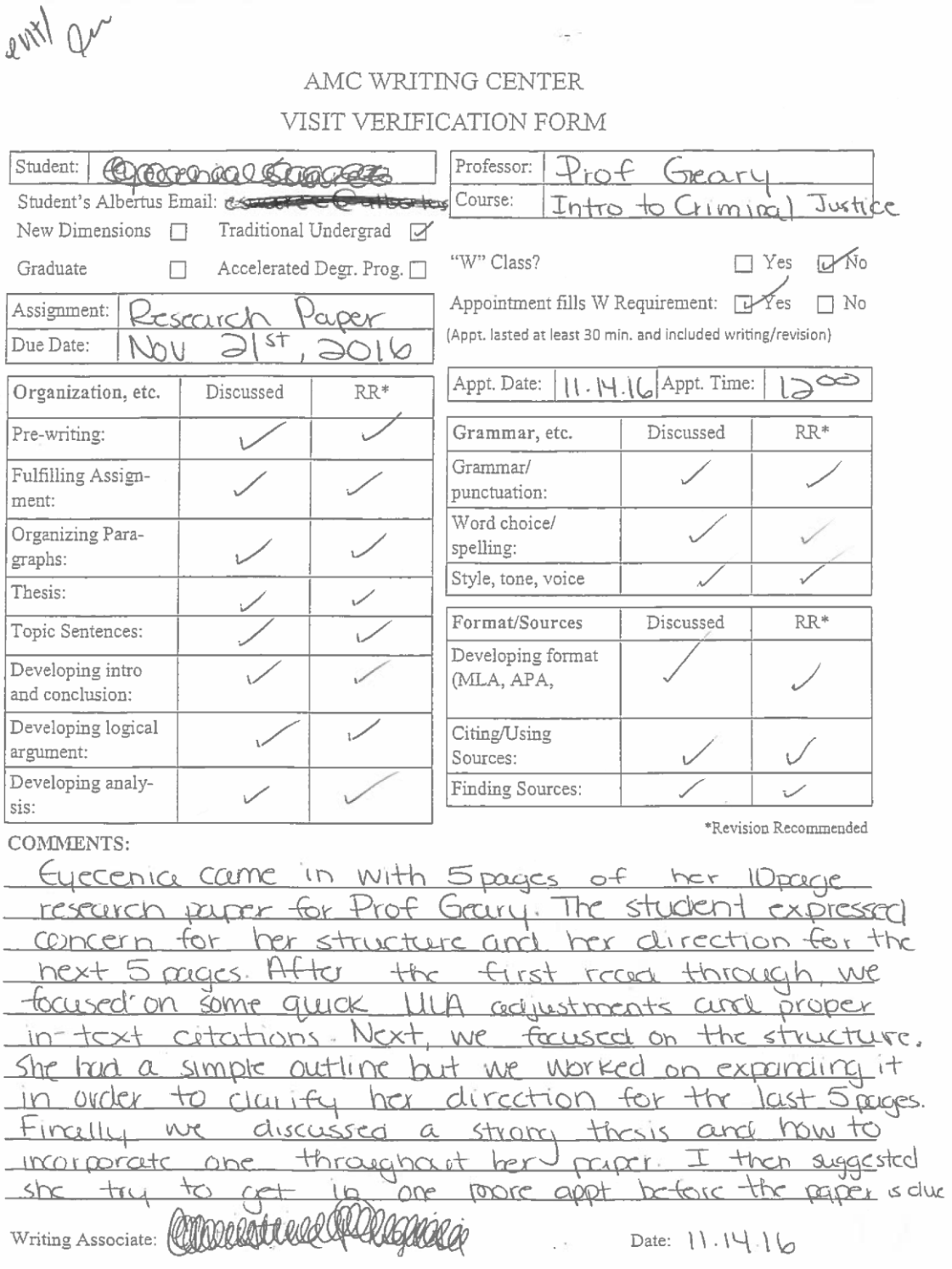
APPENDIX

Writing Process/Visit Verification Forms



AMC WRITING CENTER

VISIT VERIFICATION FORM

Student: [redacted]

Student's Albertus Email: [redacted]

New Dimensions ☐ Traditional Undergrad ☑

Graduate ☐ Accelerated Degr. Prog. ☐

Professor: Prof Geary

Course: Intro to Criminal Justice

"W" Class? ☐ Yes ☑ No

Appointment fills W Requirement: ☑ Yes ☐ No

(Appt. lasted at least 30 min. and included writing/revision)

Assignment: Research Paper

Due Date: Nov 21st, 2016

Appt. Date: 11.14.16 Appt. Time: 1200

Organization, etc.	Discussed	RR*
Pre-writing:	✓	✓
Fulfilling Assignment:	✓	✓
Organizing Paragraphs:	✓	✓
Thesis:	✓	✓
Topic Sentences:	✓	✓
Developing intro and conclusion:	✓	✓
Developing logical argument:	✓	✓
Developing analysis:	✓	✓

Grammar, etc.	Discussed	RR*
Grammar/ punctuation:	✓	✓
Word choice/ spelling:	✓	✓
Style, tone, voice	✓	✓

Format/Sources	Discussed	RR*
Developing format (MLA, APA,	✓	✓
Citing/Using Sources:	✓	✓
Finding Sources:	✓	✓

*Revision Recommended

COMMENTS:

Eyecenia came in with 5 pages of her 10 page research paper for Prof Geary. The student expressed concern for her structure and her direction for the next 5 pages. After the first read through, we focused on some quick MLA adjustments and proper in-text citations. Next, we focused on the structure. She had a simple outline but we worked on expanding it in order to clarify her direction for the last 5 pages. Finally we discussed a strong thesis and how to incorporate one throughout her paper. I then suggested she try to get in one more appt before the paper is due

Writing Associate: [redacted] Date: 11.14.16

entl/cm

AMC WRITING CENTER
VISIT VERIFICATION FORM

Student:	Nicole Ward
Student's Albertus Email:	[redacted]
New Dimensions ☐	Traditional Undergrad ☒
Graduate ☐	Accelerated Degr. Prog. ☐

Professor:	DeCarli
Course:	Organizational Comm.

"W" Class? ☒ Yes ☐ No

Appointment fills W Requirement: ☒ Yes ☐ No

(Appt. lasted at least 30 min. and included writing/revision)

Assignment:	Detective Paper
Due Date:	11/22/16

Appt. Date:	11/16
Appt. Time:	12:00

Organization, etc.	Discussed	RR*
Pre-writing:	√	—
Fulfilling Assignment:	√	√
Organizing Paragraphs:	√	√
Thesis:	√	√
Topic Sentences:	—	√
Developing intro and conclusion:	√	√
Developing logical argument:	√	√
Developing analysis:	√	√

Grammar, etc.	Discussed	RR*
Grammar/ punctuation:	—	—
Word choice/ spelling:	—	—
Style, tone, voice	—	—

Format/Sources	Discussed	RR*
Developing format (MLA, APA,	√	√
Citing/Using Sources:	√	√
Finding Sources:	√	√

*Revision Recommended

COMMENTS:

Nicole came to the Writing Center for help with her organization detective paper. We worked together to talk about the different ways she could answer the questions posed by the assignment prompt. Since we covered a lot of information, there were some areas that I suggested she ask her professor about. We worked on a potential outline of the paper so that Nicole could effectively place her ideas to help the flow of the paper. We talked about ways a thesis could be written and places where citations could be included. APA format was briefly discussed.

Writing Associate: [redacted] Date: 11/16

Art/lem

AMC WRITING CENTER
VISIT VERIFICATION FORM

Student:	[redacted]

Student's Albertus Email: [redacted]

New Dimensions ☐ Traditional Undergrad ☑

Graduate ☐ Accelerated Degr. Prog. ☐

Professor:	Veth
Course:	History + Philosophy of Education

"W" Class? ☐ Yes ☑ No

Appointment fills W Requirement: ☐ Yes ☑ No

(Appt. lasted at least 30 min. and included writing/revision)

Assignment:	Paper 2
Due Date:	10/2/16

Appt. Date:	10/31/16	Appt. Time:	3-4pm

Organization, etc.	Discussed	RR*
Pre-writing:		
Fulfilling Assignment:	✓	✓
Organizing Paragraphs:	✓	✓
Thesis:		
Topic Sentences:		
Developing intro and conclusion:		
Developing logical argument:	✓	✓
Developing analysis:	✓	✓

Grammar, etc.	Discussed	RR*
Grammar/ punctuation:	✓	✓
Word choice/ spelling:	✓	✓
Style, tone, voice		

Format/Sources	Discussed	RR*
Developing format (MLA, APA,		
Citing/Using Sources:		
Finding Sources:		

*Revision Recommended

COMMENTS:

Julia had a strong paper. Veth's papers are very open to individual interpretation and one is not required to write the paper in any specific way. However, he does want all the questions answered. She did not have all the questions answered therefore, we discussed the questions she didn't answer so she could work on them. She had quite a lot of opinions written which is fine for this paper however to encourage more details / specification. I asked her questions and did my best to challenge new ideas about opinions if her that were broad. I did this to help strengthen her ideas and overall her paper.

Writing Associate: [redacted] Date: 10/31/16

ENT/ Eng

AMC WRITING CENTER

VISIT VERIFICATION FORM

Student: [redacted]	Professor: Spencer
Student's Albertus Email:	Course: Experimental Research Methods

New Dimensions ☐ Traditional Undergrad ☑

Graduate ☐ Accelerated Degr. Prog. ☐

"W" Class? ☑ Yes ☐ No

Appointment fills W Requirement: ☑ Yes ☐ No

(Appt. lasted at least 30 min. and included writing/revision)

Assignment:	Individual Research Paper
Due Date:	5/8/17

Appt. Date:	5/2
Appt. Time:	7:00

Organization, etc.	Discussed	RR*
Pre-writing:		
Fulfilling Assignment:	✓	✓
Organizing Paragraphs:		
Thesis:		
Topic Sentences:		
Developing intro and conclusion:	✓	✓
Developing logical argument:	✓	✓
Developing analysis:		

Grammar, etc.	Discussed	RR*
Grammar/ punctuation:	✓	✓
Word choice/ spelling:		
Style, tone, voice		

Format/Sources	Discussed	RR*
Developing format (MLA, APA,	✓	✓
Citing/Using Sources:	✓	
Finding Sources:		

*Revision Recommended

COMMENTS:

Shylien came to her appointment with her research paper for her Research Methods class. The paper was organized with an abstract, title page and appropriate header including methods, materials and procedure. We discussed her introduction and the sources she will use to describe her in her paper. Throughout her paper we discussed what important information regarding her study and the participants belonged in each section in order to have a clear, organized research paper. We also went over citing articles and books in APA format within her paper. Minor corrections were made in sentence structure and punctuation.

Writing Associate: Shanie Chatfield Date: 5/2/17