WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER

Member of the NWCA:NCTE Assembly
Information Exchange Agreement

Vol. VIII, No. 4 (December, 1983)

In this stretch of the semester, as we wind down for vacations and holidays, perhaps the enclosed gifts to ourselves will bolster our exhausted states. Included in this issue of the newsletter are several very different approaches to tutor training, the topic that is most frequently asked for by newsletter readers. In upcoming months there will be articles on other frequently requested topics: expanding lab services, bringing research into the writing lab, using error analysis, serving writing-across-the-curriculum programs, and using computers in the lab.

In addition, there will be articles on new topics that many of us have not yet considered: an "early alert system" to identify students who need the writing lab, a mini-course on how to use the dictionary, a method for writing about literature, the use of transactional analysis approaches in the tutorial, dialect interference, a heuristic for developing a lab, a blueprint for writing exercises, and much, much more. Truly, we're an imaginative group, accomplishing our goals with insight and vigor! But, despite (or perhaps because of?) this constant expenditure of energy, the approaching winter break will be particularly welcome....

Happy Vacation to Us All!

And when we return, please keep sending those articles, reviews, announcements, responses, names of new members, and $5 donations (in checks made payable to Purdue University, but sent to me) to:

Muriel Harris, editor
WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER
Dept. of English
Purdue University
West Lafayette, Ind. 47907

TRAINING PEER TUTORS: PROVIDING TUTORS WITH A BASIC PROCEDURE

Peer tutoring is not inherently difficult. Even tutors without specialized knowledge of specific material (like, for example, sociology, history, or drama) can start to improve the quality of a tutee's writing by offering encouragement and very basic suggestions. But inconsistencies on the part of tutors can plague and seriously threaten the credibility of a writing center. If basic procedure is not established, the tutoring process becomes a matter of hit or miss. Some weaknesses of a paper will be addressed, but others may be ignored. A tutor may correct comma splices but ignore an underdeveloped thesis statement. To insure quality tutoring, therefore, it is imperative that a writing center establish a procedure which ensures that the important aspects of every paper are examined and evaluated.

The procedure we have developed is relatively simple. And it augments very nicely what have become standard peer tutor training practices.[1] It guarantees that the basic components of any given paper will be examined and evaluated. It also provides each tutor with a general way to approach student papers which discuss issues beyond the tutor's range of expertise. Here is the procedure we have established:

First, start with encouragement. Many students who come to the writing center will be somewhat disheartened and frustrated. Writing is difficult. Reading and uderstanding essays or literary works can also be difficult. Stress slow, steady improvement. Encourage subsequent appointments. Establish a relationship. Be lavish with your positive reinforcement.

Next, get the student thinking. Dõn't

let him or her just listen. Encourage students to think for an hour or so before they write. Get them to brainstorm. Let them be wild and crazy. Ask questions. Ask outrageous questions. Inquire about implications, assumptions, complications, consequences, connections, distinctions, and comparisons. Remember: the goal is not to fill up three blank pages with a relatively random arrangement of words grouped into a relatively random arrangement of paragraphs. Thoughts, especially when whittled down to a thesis statement and supporting topic sentences, help keep compositions relatively organized. Impress upon the student that the pen is moved not by small muscles in the hand but by ideas.

If a student brings in a draft of a paper, isolate the most problematic aspect of the student's composition. Usually it will be organization, or lack of a carefully or clearly articulated unifying focus. Extract the thesis, or what appears to be the thesis, from the paper. Write it out at the top of a clean piece of paper. Examine it. What are its implications? What does it suggest out of context? Is it in the form of a single declarative sentence? A thesis statement is the axis, the core, the pith, the heart, the center, the nucleus, the soul of a paper. Make sure the student realizes this.

Ask the student what he or she can or needs to do to persuade the reader to accept his or her point of view. What issues or points need to be raised and discussed? What counter-arguments need to be addressed? Encourage the student to define terms, clarify values, and bring out facts. Mercilessly discourage loose ends or extraneous material which compromises or diverts attention away from the central focus of the paper. Stress unity: a paper accomplishes one thing. Remember to stress that a paper is an argument, not a discussion. Therefore, a paper should have a main point and evidence to substantiate this main point. Help the student formulate an outline. For most students, an outline is a great relief. But make sure the outline is generated--with tactful help from you, of course--by the student.

When a student is having trouble with a reading assignment, help the student identify the writer's thesis. Stress that the ideas and opinions in any given piece of writing are not necessarily sanctified. A writer has no special access to The Most High And Excellent Truth. Encourage healthy skepticism. Draw attention to the assumptions animating the writer's argument, and discuss the implications and possible consequences of these assumptions.

Patrick Sullivan
University of Connecticut

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[1]See Marian Arkin, "Training Writing-Center Tutors: Issues and Approaches," New Directions for College Learning Assistance, 3 (1981); Leonard A. Podis, "Training Peer Tutors for the Writing Lab," College Composition and Communication, 31 (February 1980), 70-75; Kenneth A. Bruffee, "Two Related Issues in Peer Tutoring: Program Structure and Tutor Training," College Composition and Communication, 31 (February 1980), 76-80; Thom Hawkins, "Training Peer Tutors in the Art of Teaching," College English, 40 (December 1978), 440-43; Marian Arkin, The Tutor Book (N.Y.: Longman, 1982); Muriel Harris, Tutoring Writing: A Sourcebook for Writing Labs, (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman, 1982); and Fran Weber Shaw, 30 Ways To Help You Write (N.Y.: Bantam, 1980).

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A READER RESPONDS.....

In response to the brief mention of poorer skills this semester (WLN, Oct. 1983), I concur. I just finished grading my Basic Comp students' mid-term essays. They are the worst I've seen in my thirteen years at this school. Several of my colleagues have also noted this phenomenon. They do not seem to be assimilating and applying what they learned during the first half of the semester. They think that attendance and doing the work will automatically produce good skills. They fail to realize that they have to apply the rules and exercises to every writing assignment. I have taken drastic measures. If they work, I will inform you of them.

Jacqueline Viggiano
Onondaga Community College

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MATERIALS EXCHANGE TABLE AT 1984 CCCC

Tom Waldrep, University of South Carolina, will organize a materials display and exchange table this year at the Special Session on Writing Labs at CCCC to be held in New York, March 29-31. In the past, this table has been an invaluable addition to the Writing Centers Special Interest Group, enabling participants from all over the United States to share ideas and materials. These materials have included everything from bookmarks and brochures, letting students know a writing center is available, to descriptions of services provided, guides for tutoring, and actual materials used within the writing labs. Any materials you would like to share with other colleagues would be welcomed. As chair of the session, Jan Ugan of Utah State University, is arranging the program so there will be time between the business meeting and workshops for everyone to have an opportunity to participate in the exchange.

Should you decide to participate in the materials exchange table, the procedure is as follows:

1. Donors of display materials are to fill out the accompanying form, listing and describing materials. This form should be sent to me as soon as possible so that I can plan for adequate space.

2. Donors are to bring the materials with them to New York and turn them in to me fifteen minutes before the session begins. (I will be on duty at the table during this period, during our fifteen-minute intermission, and approximately fifteen minutes following the conclusion of the session.)

3. Materials are to be in manila folders, identified by school and individual, and marked "Display Only: Do Not Remove." A legal pad (with school, individual identification, and the cost of return postage) should be included in the folder for names and addresses of those requesting copies.

4. While the exchange will be handled primarily by mail, you may prefer to bring 50-100 copies of your handout to eliminate the expense and delay of mailing.

Date _____

TO: Tom Waldrep
Director, Freshman English
English Department
University of South Carolina
Columbia, South Carolina 29208

FROM: (name) _____

(school) _____

(address) _____

Materials for Exchange Table:

(List and briefly describe type, size, content, etc.)

_____ I will bring copyrighted materials that can be ordered.

_____ I will bring 50-100 copies of my handouts to New York.

_____ I will bring a sample of a handout to New York.

_____ I will be able to send copies to those requesting them.

_____ I am mailing to you copies (or a sample) to be placed on the Materials Exchange Table.

5. Donors will be responsible for picking up their folders during the fifteen minutes following the session.

Those of you who would like to participate in the materials exchange but who will not be able to attend the convention may send your materials straight to New York at the following address any time after the first of March:

Tom Waldrep
Conference on College Composition
and Communication
Sheraton Center Hotel
52nd Street and Seventh Avenue
New York, New York 10019

Because of rising costs in mailing, should

you wish to have materials returned to you, please include postage to cover mailing costs.

On the same subject of rising costs, we realize that with budget cutbacks and travel limitations not everyone who would like to will be able to attend CCCC's and participate in the materials exchange. If you are in this position and have particular information in mind you would like sent to you, let me know before the convention. I will then check the information available and add your name to the list provided if what you want is part of the exchange.

If you have any materials at all you think others would also find useful, please plan to share them by participating in the materials exchange table. Any questions or suggestions you might have please direct to Tom Waldrep, Director of Freshman English, English Department, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina 29208.

A READER RESPONDS.....

Gary Lichtenstein's experience as Super Tutor should, perhaps, be enlarged about realistic goals and expectations for tutors. He reminds me of an experience a decade or so ago with a student who had been caught in the net of our Junior English Examination. (Write a passable essay on one of several topics, or fail. He had failed.)

When I tutored him, I did as I do with other students, and ask them how their grades in other classes are coming as a result of what they've learned. One day this lad brought me a paper he had written for Political Science; it had a C grade. "That's good," said I (always take a positive approach). "Is this grade better than other grades you've got on papers recently?"

"It sure is," he said enthusiastically. "It's mine. I never wrote none of my other papers."

George Gleason
Southwest Missouri
State University

SELECTING AND TRAINING PEER TUTORS FOR BUSINESS WRITING

In 1979, Purdue's Writing Lab added a new service, offering specialized instruction to juniors and seniors taking business writing. By mid-semester of 1982, we realized we had sold this lab service too well: not only were business writing students attending drop-ins and tutorials regularly, but word had gotten out that tutors in the lab could answer questions about resumes and job application letters. As a result of word-of-mouth advertising and the tight job market, we were literally inundated with students, particularly during drop-ins. It was not unusual to find four or five students waiting when tutors walked in the door to begin drop-ins. Of course, each student had at least twenty minutes worth of questions that had to be answered that day, and tutors squirmed and students began to fume as the lines got longer. Clearly something had to be done if business writing tutors were to maintain their sanity and students were to continue to find the lab a place where they could get help.

There seemed to be three ways to address the problem: we could simply turn away students we knew we would not have time to see and thus preserve our wits; we could limit help to those currently taking business writing classes and therefore maintain the mutually satisfactory relationship we had established with business writing instructors and their students; or we could find some way to expand our staff, enabling us to support the business writing program, fend off our own growing fatigue, and continue to provide services to students facing the harsh realities of a glutted job market.

Because our department, like many others, was unlikely to respond favorably to a request for more graduate instructors because of a tight budget and lack of staff, we began to consider a program using graduate student mentors and undergraduate peer tutors. Two features of Purdue's business writing program made this alternative particularly attractive: 1) the extensive use of peer evaluation in business writing classes provided a pool of students who were already experienced in responding to their peers' writing and 2) a trend toward frequent student-teacher conferencing among business writing instructors pro-

vided an administrative pool of experienced graduate student teachers who consider one-on-one instruction important and feel comfortable in tutorial situations. Therefore, we could select peer tutors from students who had already completed the business writing course successfully and had demonstrated the ability to respond effectively in peer evaluation sessions. Moreover, we could train these tutors fairly simply using a mentoring system which drew upon business writing instructors already comfortable with and committed to conferencing.

We began the business writing peer tutoring program in the Spring 1983 semester as an experimental program. Six peer tutors and six mentors received practicum credit for working in the lab, primarily with seniors writing resumes and employment letters but also with students taking business writing courses. Although this program is in its infancy, I believe I've learned enough to be able to pose questions you should seriously address should you consider using peer tutors for business writing.

1. How do you make sure that peer tutors are qualified to evaluate and help students with business writing?

2. How do you deal with the problem of peer tutors' credibility?

3. What benefits can peer tutors offer students which writing lab staff instructors cannot?

4. What benefits does a peer tutoring program offer peer tutors?

5. What benefits does a peer tutoring program offer the lab?

How do you make sure that peer tutors are qualified to evaluate and help students with business writing?

Through a careful selection procedure and training process. The selection process at Purdue has been effectively streamlined because of the widespread use of peer evaluation in business writing classes. We've been able, as an initial screening mechanism, to ask teachers to perform stage one of the selection process. They have selected students earning B or A grades who have performed effectively in class peer evaluation sessions. Then they have invited these students to apply for peer tutoring positions by distributing letters giving information about the practicum and application process. Even if you, or your colleagues, don't currently teach business writing classes which include peer evaluation, you might ask students who write well and who respond intelligently and sensitively in discussions about writing to work in your lab.

As stage two of the selection process, we evaluated resumes and job application letters submitted by business writing students. We specifically looked for evidence of writing ability, understanding of business writing principles, and proof of oral communication skills. Then we scheduled the most promising applicants for interviews, during which we measured oral communication and listening skills and found out why applicants want to work in the lab. This screening process has served us well at Purdue because it addresses the needs of our specialized program. As you begin to delineate the steps of your screening process, think about the functions you wish peer tutors to perform and the clientele they will be serving. Then try to build into your system methods of measuring applicants' abilities to perform these functions.

The second means of insuring quality instruction is careful training. I believe training procedures for peer tutors should meet the following criteria:

1. They should introduce peer tutors to general lab resources, procedures, and record keeping methods.

2. They should provide special resources for the specific context in which peer tutors work.

3. They should allow ample time for on-going discussions of tutoring techniques and the writing process.

Although there are many training approaches you might successfully use, we've found one particularly useful when coordinating lab services with a specialized writing pro-

gram: the apprenticeship model. Each peer tutor is assigned to a mentor, who works with him or her for the duration of the semester. Specific training consists of orientation, observation, and discussion. Two general orientation meetings introduce peer tutors (and sometimes mentors) to 1) lab resources and procedures and 2) effective tutoring techniques. We've found it useful to collect at the initial meeting portfolios of assignments peer tutors have completed in their business writing courses so mentors can easily identify types of memos, letters, and reports they are qualified to tutor and can quickly identify the particular strengths their peer tutors can bring to the lab. Peer tutors then observe their mentors tutoring and are observed by their mentors as they tutor. Finally peer tutors meet with mentors weekly during scheduled consultation times and with other peer tutors and a lab supervisor bi-weekly for meetings. During consultations and meetings, peer tutors and mentors engage in on-going discussions of tutoring techniques and writing, drawing upon lab resources when useful. In addition, they prepare for assignments which business writing students will bring in by reviewing the content, rhetorical strategies, and traditional features of those assignments and by speculating about problems students are likely to encounter as they write the assignments.

How do you deal with the problem of peer tutors' credibility?

Most importantly, we've found that introducing peer tutors to business writing students as those who have "made the grade" inevitably satisfies most lab clients; and in the few cases when such an introduction has left students skeptical, we've discovered that peer tutors are their own best defense. For example, the first three students Scott (a graduating senior) tutored on his own turned out, to his chagrin, to be members of classes he was currently taking. When they challenged his ability to help them improve their resumes, Scott simply asked them how many interviews they had scheduled. When they discovered he had 15 set up for the next few weeks, they were suitably impressed and suddenly quite eager to listen to what he had to say.

In addition, we've decided to raise our peer tutors' status in the eyes of students by changing their titles to "writing consultants" next semester. According to Mary Sheldon, who directs the writing center at De Pauw University, calling peer tutors writing consultants defines their roles more clearly to students and lessens student apprehension about coming to the lab. Students have heard that businesses hire writing consultants to run in-house workshops and seminars; therefore, working with a writing consultant does not carry the stigma of remediation which working with a peer tutor might.

What benefits can peer tutors offer students which writing lab staff instructors cannot?

First of all, they can establish rapport more quickly. Because they have been through the rites of passage -- in Purdue's case they have completed our business writing course very successfully -- students believe they have figured out the system. Therefore, students are likely to grant peer tutors more ready acceptance than they do older tutors or teachers, who are, as we all know, so caught up in the red pen instinct that they quickly jump to criticism and are impatient with "wrong answers." Secondly, peer tutors create a dialogue rather than a monologue about writing. Because peer tutors are viewed as consultants rather than experts, students are more willing to question peer tutors than "regular instructors." If they're confused, they're more willing to ask peer tutors to slow down or to explain something in a different way. If they disagree, they're more likely to prod, even push, for reasons behind suggestions; to try out alternative ways of approaching the same writing problem; more willing, in other words, to experiment and discuss options than they would be if they worked with graduate student instructors who are frequently perceived as people with the "correct answers." Third, peer tutors skillfully use techniques and bring special expertise to their work which graduate instructors cannot.

I've observed Purdue's peer tutors effectively using techniques graduate student instructors cannot so easily get away with when working with graduating seniors on resumes or job application letters. Because the peer tutors are themselves going to school, they can nudge, badger, even bully students into doing what they need to do to make employment corre-

spondence effective -- without sounding like lecturers. They can even chide students to pay attention to the "picky" points of grammar and mechanics without sounding like English teachers. In addition, peer tutors bring a special expertise to conferences: because of their familiarity with the employment search process, they can offer support as only fellow job seekers can. In particular, they can offer advice about stages of the job search with which teachers have little familiarity. For example, peer tutors who are looking for jobs know better than we do how to effectively use university placement services and local copy centers -- and how to bolster egos temporarily deflated by uncertainties inherent in the job search.

Suppose now that you believe peer tutors can offer students benefits teachers cannot and that you decide to use peer tutors.

What benefits can you offer them in return for their services?

Money is certainly one option -- however, one not always available. Course credit is another -- and one that Purdue uses, along with funds from the student government for writing consultants who have already taken the practicum course for credit. And finally, you can offer less tangible but no less valuable benefits. You can enable peer tutors

- to solidify their knowledge of writing principles through teaching;
- to develop listening skills and gain oral communication experience useful for their careers; and
- to demonstrate to prospective employers the ability to solve problems, to be flexible, and to communicate effectively in one-on-one situations.

What benefits does a peer tutoring program offer the lab?

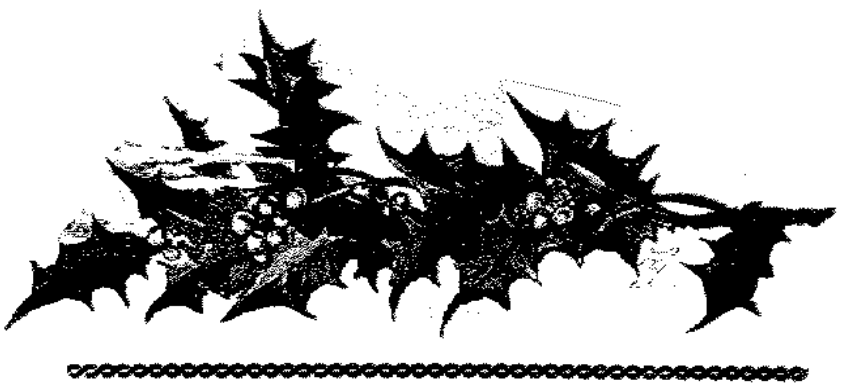
In our case, peer tutors

- enable the lab to provide needed services to student searching for jobs;
- provide additional staff at no or minimal cost; and
- give graduate student instructors more time to deal efficiently with students' long term writing problems and to develop materials needed by all business writing students.

In sum, the overall results of our peer tutoring program so far have been exciting. The four mentors and three peer tutors who have not earned degrees this semester are continuing in the program. One peer tutor who performed exceptionally well will mentor next semester. Both mentors and peer tutors have brought a freshness and special excitement to the lab which has renewed some of us who had perhaps become too used to the fast pace and rapid succession of faces which tutoring in writing centers brings. Moreover, students have spread the word that the program provides a useful service to students and worthwhile experience to those serving as peer tutors; consequently, when we selected our new batch of peer tutors for next semester, we had three times the applications that we had for last semester. We look forward to an even larger program next year. Should you decide to begin a peer tutoring program, I hope you find the challenges as rewarding and the benefits as many as we have.

Judith Kilborn
Purdue University

(If you would like copies of our letter to prospective applicants and our list of suggested readings for the business writing tutors, please send a stamped, self-addressed envelope to me, c/o Dept. of English, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN 47907).



CALL FOR PAPERS

The Writing Centers Association: East Central announces its Sixth Annual Conference, to be held on May 4-5, 1984, at Raymond Walters General and Technical College of the University of Cincinnati. The theme of the conference is "Writing: 1984." Papers, panels, and workshops should address standard concerns of writing centers, including using computers and writing across the curriculum. Persons interested in participating should submit a substantive one-page proposal (plus 3 copies) by January 15, 1984.

In addition, writing centers and labs are invited to set up tables to display their materials and services. There will also be Materials Exchange Tables available for those who wish to share instructional materials from their writing centers. If you plan to participate in the Materials Exchange, please send us, by April 1, a brief description of the types of materials you wish to submit and indicate the amount of space you will need to display these materials. Those interested in submitting requests for display booths and space to display materials should do so by April 1, 1984.

Please send all proposals, requests for display space, and inquiries regarding registration to:

Phyllis A. Sherwood
9555 Plainfield Road
Cincinnati, Ohio 45236

CALL FOR MANUSCRIPTS

"The Relationship Between Literature and Expository Writing" is the topic for the February 1984 edition of English Notes. There may also be a section in this issue of EN on computers and writing. Articles should be between 500 and 2000 words, include a short biographical sketch, and contain the following statement: "NCTE affiliate journals may reproduce my article upon request." Book reviews on these topics will be considered and should be less than 500 words. Payment in copies. Please include a SASE. Deadline: January 10, 1984. Send manuscripts to:

George Staley, Editor, English Notes
Sinte Gleska College
Box 156
Mission, SD 57555

USING FLOWCHARTS TO TRAIN LAB TUTORS

One of the earliest problems of beginning tutors in the Idaho State University writing lab stems from their lack of familiarity with the mechanics of the important procedures and cycles of the lab. Tutors are very unsure of whether they're "doing things right," whether they're greeting and registering a new student, filling out the data sheet, or whatever. They feel out of control having no sense of the system. We have a fairly complicated record keeping and data collection process, and this accounts for part of the problem--beginning tutors are constantly afraid of forgetting something. However, a more important reason seems simply to be that writing lab teaching is somewhat confusing at first because it is a different mode of teaching from that of the classroom, where our tutors get their initial experience. Lab tutoring involves a new set of processes and procedures that tutors must internalize if they are to work efficiently with students.

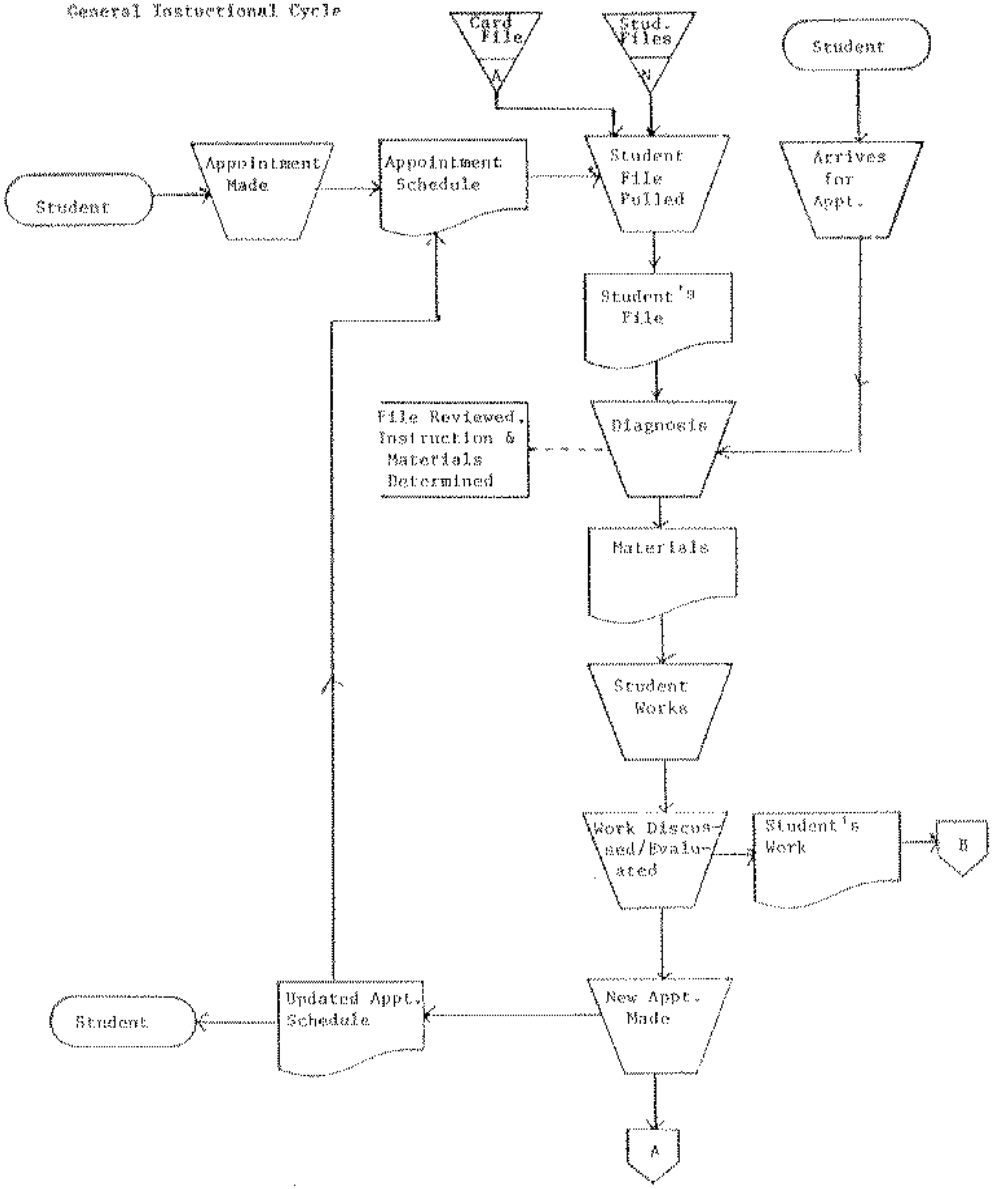
To acquaint new tutors with the mechanics of lab procedures and operations and to give them a reference source in their beginning weeks, this semester I've adopted a practice widespread in business for training new personnel: the use of flowcharts. I've drawn up flowcharts of four major cycles--the first visit cycle, the general instructional cycle, the student report cycle, and the data processing cycle--and these are some of the first materials I give new tutors. They find the pictorial representation clear, easy to follow, and easy to refer to. Though they may only use these charts the first few times through a cycle, during those times they have an enhanced sense of control and a clearer understanding of the mechanics of the procedure. These sorts of charts may have the disadvantage of suggesting that we are rigid in our procedures and dehumanized and dehumanizing in our instruction, but as long as we are not, and as long as the purpose of such schemas is kept clear, they can form a very useful part of the lab training materials.

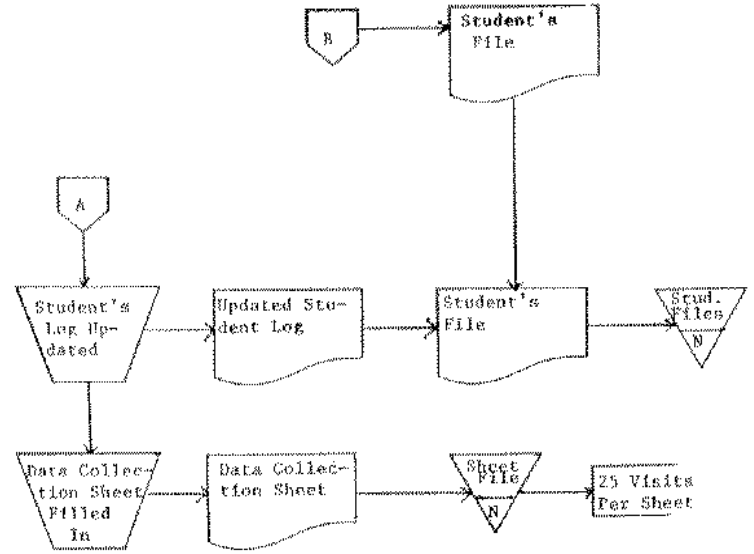
Following are some examples of the technique, and I would welcome any comments or charts from other labs with different cycles

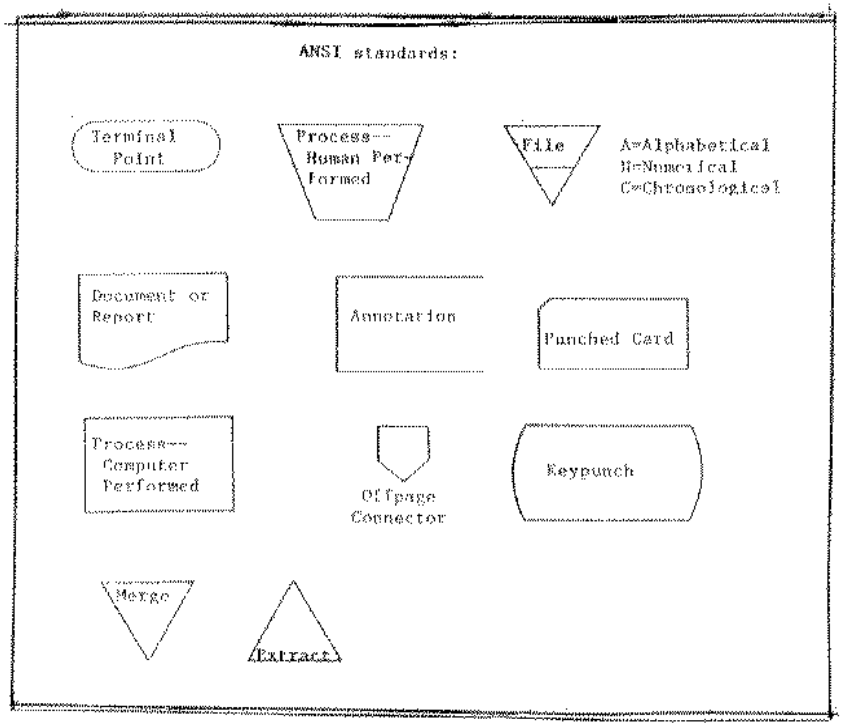
or variations on these. The flowcharting symbols conform to the ANSI standards:

Roger Clark
Idaho State
University

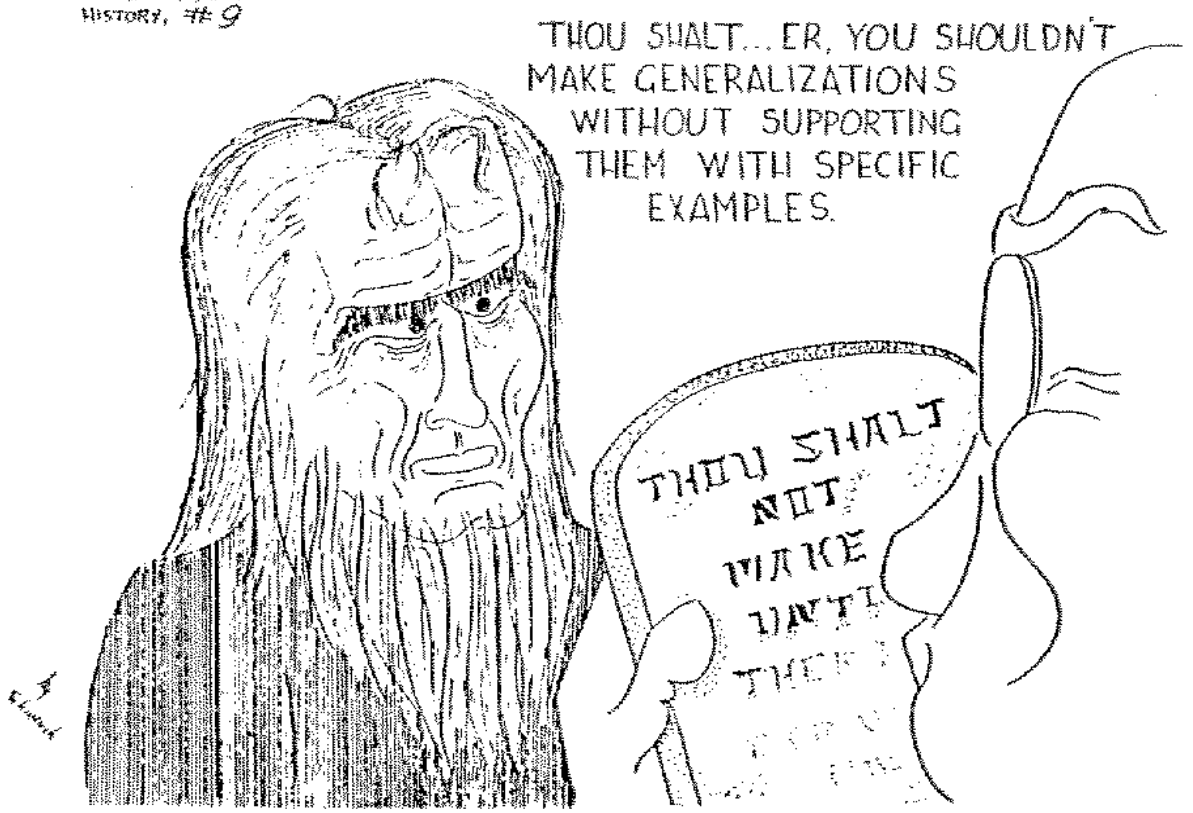
General Instructional Cycle







GREAT MOMENTS
IN WRITING LAB
HISTORY, #9



WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER
Muriel Harris, editor
Dept. of English
Purdue University
West Lafayette, Ind. 47907

SEASON'S GREETINGS