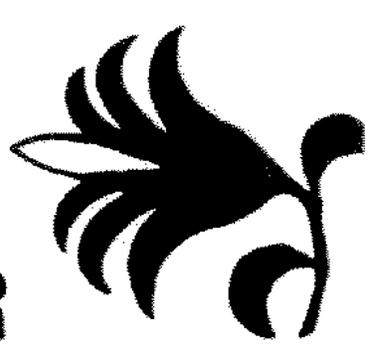




# WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER



Member of the NWCA:NCTE Assembly  
Information Exchange Agreement

Vol. IX, No. 2 (October, 1984)

During this hectic time of the semester, you may not want to contemplate adding yet one more item to your agenda. But do keep in mind the one-day workshop on writing labs (both high school and college) to be held at the NCTE meeting in Detroit, November 19. For information, contact Jeanette Harris, Dept. of English, Texas Tech, Lubbock, TX 79409 (806-742-2504). And in March the annual Special Interest Session for writing lab personnel will be held at the CCCC conference in Minneapolis. For information, contact Tom Waldrep, English Department, U. of South Carolina, Columbia, SC 29208. Regional writing center association meetings will be announced throughout the year.

Between meetings let's continue to keep in touch via the newsletter. Please keep sending your articles, notices, reviews, questions, comments, names of new members, and yearly \$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, IN 47907

•••••  
**1984 Writing Lab Directory**

The 1984 Writing Lab Directory is a compilation of two-page questionnaires completed by writing lab directors. The questionnaire answers describe each lab's instructional staff, student population, types of instruction and materials, special programs, use of computers, and facilities.

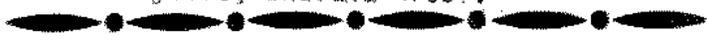
Copies are obtainable for \$6.50 each, including postage. Prepaid orders only. Please make all checks payable to Purdue University and send them to Muriel Harris, Department of English, Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana 47907.

## EMPHASIZING ORAL PROOFREADING IN THE WRITING LAB: A MULTI-FUNCTION TECHNIQUE FOR BOTH TUTORS AND STUDENTS

For the past year we have been emphasizing a technique which has made our writing lab staff both more efficient and more effective in meeting student needs. The technique, oral proofreading, is multi-functional: it works for the tutor by shortening the time it takes to diagnose grammar and syntax problems and by making those diagnoses more accurate; it works for the student by emphasizing writing as process and by providing a method which makes him an effective editor of his own work. Moreover, contrary to expectations, it has proven especially useful to ESL student writers. There is nothing radically new about the technique; what is perhaps new is the emphasis we are giving to it and to the interconnections between speech, reading and writing its use implies.

Our emphasis on oral proofreading has as its theoretical base Mina Shaughnessy's key premise that errors should be seen as powerful indicators of the kinds of problems our students have.<sup>1</sup> Our experience in the writing lab has taught us that, as a corollary to this premise, we must separate those errors which are true errors--deviations from convention--from what must be called, for lack of a better term, accident, before we spend valuable time diagnosing, categorizing and theorizing about intention and causation. A single oral proofreading session will usually provide ample evidence of the fact that what we as teachers/editors see on a student's final draft may not be what he intended us to see. Donald Bartholomae noted this in his article, "The Study of Error:"

We need, in general, to refine our understanding of performance-based errors, and



we need to refine our teaching to take into account the high percentage of error in written composition that is rooted in difficulty of performance rather than in problems of general linguistic competence.

The writing lab situation is ideally suited to this task, but we need to add an awareness of how people read to our growing knowledge of how people write in order to do it. We do our lab students a disservice if we do not include among our goals the teaching of skills which enable the writer to produce a text which actually conforms, in graphic display, to his intentions.

The impetus for our interest in oral proofreading came from two sources. One was my own despair at seeing how many students failed the university competence exam because they had not proofread effectively enough to correct surface errors. I learned this lack of control of the editing process was the cause when I had them read their papers to me during our conferences. Often the students were incredulous at discovering their many errors, remarking that they had indeed proofread their papers before turning them in. Since failure of the competence exam can keep students from graduating, I knew we, in the writing lab, had a responsibility to tackle what was clearly a widespread problem.

At the same time, some of my tutors had been complaining. Lab policy was for tutors to do assessments of the writing samples provided by students before their first appointment. By the end of the first session these tutors sometimes felt they had done error analysis, made plans and readied materials for non-existent grammatical or syntactic problems. Some students were docile and submitted to the drills the tutor unwittingly provided; others announced their boredom and stated that, "they knew all this, so when were we going to deal with the real problems--the reasons for the D grade on their paper?"

We decided to combine the two experiences, the tutors' and mine, to produce a new program. We eliminated pre-assessments, a radical departure greeted by tutors with both relief for time saved and fear for lack of "something" to do. They were instructed to have all students bringing writing samples, final drafts or even graded compositions to the lab read them aloud for the purposes of proofreading. During a training

session, tutors were shown samples of essays indicating changes made during oral proofreading. They were asked to do a different kind of error analysis, one that called for very careful listening to and simultaneous viewing of the text as it was read. Data collection sheets were provided.

There are three basic categories useful for this analysis: errors the student does not notice and does not correct orally, errors the student corrects orally and acknowledges as incorrect on his paper by noting a change, and errors which the student corrects orally but does not recognize or acknowledge on his paper.

Each category requires a different response from the tutor because each is evidence of a different need. The tutor wastes no time on suppositions about the errors in Category I; the student is right there to give substantive information as to his intent.

In order to help those students whose oral diagnostic indicates poor proofreading skills (Categories II and III), we had to begin by acknowledging that reading is a very selective process involving only partial use of the available language cues selected from perceptual input by the reader on the basis of his expectations. In fact, the experienced reader has been described as one who "grabs only the general contours of a word and on that basis guesses the meaning of the word as a whole." Obviously, the reader of his own composition knows what's coming next. With expectation and predictability operating at a very high level, the brain tells the eye to move along very quickly in a series of jumps from one fixation point to another. No useful information is transmitted during the movements between these points. These jumps are the characteristic feature of reading for both good and poor readers, although the "good" reader is usually defined as someone who makes fewer fixations per average line. The poor proofreader is following the very process that denotes a "good" reader when he doesn't see his errors.

Oral proofreading is the key to improving editing skills for such a student because it interferes with "normal" reading processes. Eye pattern movements are different in oral and silent reading. In silent reading there are fewer fixations, shorter pauses and few regressions. Adults reading silently to themselves bypass subvocalization and go

directly to the abstract meaning for which the written text is only a notation (Gibson, p. 278). To improve proofreading skills, students must reinstate earlier patterns of behavior connecting the visual, orthographic and aural by reading their text aloud slowly, but with emphasis for meaning. Students whose oral readings give evidence of severe discrepancies between what they say and what is actually on the page are asked to point to each word with a pencil as they read aloud. The tutor monitors carefully to see that the pencil is always under the word being said. That is as close as we can come as writing lab tutors to dealing with the phenomenon of eye fixations.

So that students do not perceive the procedure as demeaning, tutors emphasize that this method of reading is for purposes of editing only, and they remind students that there are different styles of reading appropriate for different purposes. Reading specialists tell us that readers process different features of a word and assign different priorities to one over the other depending on their utility to them for a particular task or goal (Gibson, p. 466). I could certainly illustrate that by telling the student about the multitude of errors I failed to notice in Joseph Williams' clever article, "The Phenomenology of Error" in a recent issue of College Composition and Communication. Because I was skimming the article, assuming correctness, and reading for meaning a text on a subject familiar to me, I used minimal visual clues in reading. My processing subordinated lexical, graphic, orthographic, phonetic, morphological and probably syntactic features. The student already knows how devilishly effective I can be when I use another style of reading--red pen in hand--so the relation of purpose to method and result should be clear.

The roles played by expectation and prediction in the reading process ought to lead us to the conclusion that a student can not be taught to proofread his own work effectively by having him do error searches on mimeographed exercises. Such drills will have little carry-over; the attention to the graphic features of "accidental" error must occur where it would not normally occur--in the student's own writing. As should be standard practice in writing labs, tutoring for poor proofreaders emphasizes their knowledge rather than their lack of ability.

Since a student never intends error, he may be upset to see the discrepancies oral proofreading uncovers. Tutors provide proofreading practice which asks the student to bring his knowledge of grammar, usage, syntax and spelling to the task of editing. The emphasis is on checking for correctness rather than on searching for error.

Beyond helping students "see" individual letters and words more accurately, oral proofreading can focus the student's attention on syntax. Students whose primary errors are run-ons or fragments develop an ability to "hear" those errors when they proofread orally. The tutor first provides specific training by giving oral examples of how punctuation determines the way we read to establish meaning. The student's oral reading of his text is carefully monitored to see that it acknowledges the existence or non-existence of punctuation: the use of long or short pauses for commas or periods, or the raising or dropping of the voice at the end of a sentence.

One of the benefits we attribute to an emphasis on oral proofreading is that it promotes the concept of writing as process. Although it may seem as if my lab is exhibiting a myopic concern for surface error while the enlightened writing lab focuses on higher level skills, let me assure you that we teach proofreading as final step in the writing process. The emphasis on editing for error at the end of the process helps to remove fear of error, a severely inhibiting factor, from the initial stages of composing. This is particularly useful to our work with ESL students who diligently learn grammar rules, but whose development as writers is often arrested by their concern with correctness. Once convinced by our emphasis on proofreading that error is natural to the process of writing, to be dealt with skillfully before the task is considered complete, the ESL student begins to write more freely.

Despite our own attitudes about the primacy of content in writing, the student whose written work is replete with surface errors is at a severe disadvantage in the classroom or in the business world. Without denying our own valid concern with teaching higher level skills, we in the writing lab must provide our students with techniques which enable them to control their written

text. Oral proofreading is an effective aid to such skill development.

Shelly Samuels  
Northeastern Illinois  
University

<sup>1</sup>Mina Shaughnessy, Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

<sup>2</sup>David Bartholomae, "The Study of Error," CCC, 31 (October, 1980), p. 264.

<sup>3</sup>Eleanor J. Gibson and Harry Levin, The Psychology of Reading (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1976), p. 453.

<sup>4</sup>Joseph Williams, "The Phenomenology of Error," CCC, 32 (May, 1981), pp. 152-168.

#### EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

English: Coordinator of Writing Center. Full time, 12 months. Non-tenure track. Responsibilities: training and supervision of instructors and tutors in the Center, liaison with other academic units on campus, development of formal presentations and of instructional materials, and instruction in the Center. Salary: \$24,000. Qualifications: Ph.D. in English, at least two years of college-level classroom teaching of composition, and experience teaching in a writing center. Also two positions available for instructors in the Center. Full time, 12 months. Non-tenure track. Salary \$20,000. Responsibilities: tutoring and other instruction in the Center and performance of other duties as assigned by coordinator. Qualifications: Ph.D. preferred; at least two years of college-level classroom teaching; experience in a writing center preferred. Starting date for all three positions: before 1 November 1984. Submit application letter and complete dossier including letters of evaluation by 1 October 1984 to Dr. Kenneth Kinnamon, Chairman, Department of English, 333 Kimpel Hall, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR 72701. The University of Arkansas is an Affirmative Action, Equal Opportunity Employer.

#### EGO STATES AND THE WRITING LAB STAFF

In the two books Games People Play and I'm OK--You're OK, Eric Berne and Thomas Harris describe a system of communication called "Transactional Analysis," which can easily be applied to writing lab situations. Basically, there are three ego states--Adult, Parent, and Child--which we can slip into at any time, depending on the circumstances. The adult focusses on "how to," the parent on "ought to," and the child on "want to," and the distinct set of behaviors which accompany each can help the tutor diagnose which state both he and the student are in, and therefore make adaptations so they are compatible. The different characteristics are as follows:

##### CHILD:

The child ego state is not bad--it is the curious, emotional, charming, pleasurable, irrational side within us all. The child sometimes feels inferior and seeks to impress others; sometimes he is manipulative, sometimes teasing, sometimes shy, sometimes irritating, and usually necessary, because only in the child ego state can the thrill of personal discovery and true creativity take place.

##### PARENT:

The parent ego state has many sides. It speaks in absolute rules, punctuated with frequent "shoulds" and "oughts" and commands. The parent is impatient with the child ego state, sometimes preferring to hear only himself talk, and sometimes even doing the work for the child, because he becomes frustrated with the child's slowness. At the same time, the parent can be sympathetic and encouraging, even overprotective. This ego state is always the manifestation of our own parents within us.

##### ADULT:

The adult ego state is the analytical one. Rather than rely on emotion or parental platitudes, the adult explores possibilities in the student's ideas, because he respects him. You'll hear the adult rephrasing the student's ideas or digressing from the topic in order to stimulate more ideas. He has several heuristics (thought-provokers) in his head, so he can push the student to make discoveries on his own, defend them and make connections and comparisons on his own. The adult's whole attitude is one of suggestion and "what-if," rather than command.

Transactional Analysis involves chains of stimulus and response; it is possible to manipulate others, as well as yourself, into the best possible combination of these roles. (Child to child) and (adult to adult) often work best in the lab, simply because the objectives are most often creativity and analysis. In the following sketch, we will be examining both good and bad tutoring sessions in light of this theory.

#### SITUATION I

A student in the child ego state (very dependent) brings an essay topic to the lab and cannot get started. In the bad session, the tutor will incorrectly assume the parent role. In the good session, the tutor will assume the child role, since the objective is creativity. She will, of course, have to mingle the adult questioning technique with this, but the overall effect is success.

#### BAD SESSION:

Tutor: "Hi. What can I do for you?"

Student: (Sigh) "I have to do an essay, and I can't get started." (Eyes on paper)

T: "What's the topic?"

S: (Hands paper to her silently)

T: (Reading aloud) "'Write an essay in which you choose a significant prejudice of yours and analyze its origin.' ~~Hummmmm~~. . . That doesn't seem so hard!"

S: (Grimace, shrug, eyes still on paper)

T: (Accusingly) "Have you even thought about this topic?"

S: "A little." (Rubs face and leans on elbow between them, attitude of nonchalance)

T: (Sigh, pointing finger) "You OUGHT to brainstorm before writing any essay, just so you can get down what you do and don't know on paper. If you write it straight out of your head, it'll be an unorganized mess and you'll get a poor grade. Do you usually write that way?"

S: (Giggles, shrugs, eyes still on paper) "I don't know."

T: (Frown) "Well, I can't write this for you. You'll have to supply the ideas."

S: "OK." (Briefly meets tutor's eyes)

T: "What prejudices do you have?" (Leans away from student, leaving her in the spotlight)

S: (Thoughtful)

T: "Everyone has prejudices! Here's a pencil. Make a list."

S: "OK."

T: "Let's see. When you date someone, what prejudices do you have?"

S: "I don't know. (Laughs) I have a boyfriend."

T: "OK. What made you want to go out with him in the first place?"

S: "I really don't remember."

T: (Frustrated) "Would you go out with someone who was fat, ugly, or poor?"

S: "Probably not."

T: "OK. Write that down."

S: (Holds pencil and blinks)

T: (Slow and patronizing) "Fat, ugly, or poor."

S: "Fat . . . now what do you want me to write?"

T: (Snatches pencil) "Let me see that pencil! Fat, ugly, or poor; that's your prejudice! Now we need to develop it with examples and figure out its origin."

S: (Nod)

T: "Well . . . do your parents object to the same things?"

S: "I don't know."

T: "You should! Doesn't your mom ever comment on your dates?"

S: (Leans back in chair, irritated sigh, looks around the room) "Not really."

T: "Look, maybe this isn't such a good topic. You sit here and think up five possible prejudices for me, and then you call me when you're done. OK?"

S: (Watches tutor leave, looks at blank paper for ten seconds, looks around fur- tively, and leaves)

Student dependency or passivity can be a real source of frustration for tutors, as you can see from the result of this session. The student was obviously in the child ego state. Her inability to get started on the topic had produced a feeling

of inadequacy, and she immediately attached herself to the tutor, hoping she would write the paper for her. The tutor's reaction was to slip into the parent state, because the student's apparent laziness irritated her. The tutor made three scolding comments in a row: "That doesn't seem so hard!" "Have you thought about this topic?" and then the lecture on writing papers straight out of the head. The student reacted negatively and stayed in the child ego state. The downcast eyes, the shrugs, and the giggling were all clues, while the physical act of putting the elbow between the tutor and herself indicated resentment and a short attention span.

The tutor moved briefly into the adult state by asking questions, but the student's feeble answers frustrated her, and the slowness in writing the ideas down made her snatch the pencil from her and do it herself. This is exactly what the child in the student wanted--to manipulate her into doing all the work.

Finally, the topic the tutor chose probably was not the best, yet the tutor clung to it until it was hopeless, just as a parent might be reluctant to try a new approach and risk losing authority. The frowns, judgmental remarks, "shoulds," "oughts," wagging finger, and unwillingness to treat the student as an equal, if only by meeting her eyes and leaning toward her receptively, all spelled out "parent" to the student. The last remark the tutor made about sitting there and writing five prejudices was exactly like sending her to her room to think about it. Instead of learning anything, the child in the student simply wanted to get away from an unpleasant situation.

Note the difference in the second session:

GOOD SESSION:

Tutor: "Hi. What can I do for you?"

Student: (Sigh) "I have to do an essay and can't get started." (Downcast eyes)

T: "What's the topic?"

S: (Hands it to her silently)

T: (Reading aloud) "'Write an essay in which you choose a significant prejudice of yours and analyze its origins.' Oh yeah!

I remember that one from my Freshman Comp class, and I had a ball with it! What was it that I wrote on . . . ? Oh! I couldn't stand old people driving! Every time I saw grey hair, I'd automatically assume old Grandpa wouldn't go over 15 mph, had slow reflexes, turned corners WIDE, and was the cause of 50% of all traffic fatalities! (Laugh) It all started when my grandmother drove me to school once. She hit both the car in front and the car in back when she tried to park! I remember I really went off about it in my paper. (Active hand movements)

S: (Eye contact with tutor, smile)

T: "I'll bet you've got a hundred of those little pet peeves floating around in your head, too.

S: "Probably."

T: "Well, let's throw some topics around and see if you can identify with any of them."

S: "OK." (Leans on elbow facing tutor)

T: "Dating."

S: "Ummmm. . . . I don't know."

T: "Would you date someone who was fat, ugly, or poor?"

S: (Shrug)

T: "OK. That's not an exciting one. How about teachers?"

S: "Well. . . ."

T: "How did you picture college professors before you came here?"

S: "I thought they were all old, but they're not!"

T: "Great! What made you think that?"

S: "I don't know. Books and stuff, I guess."

T: "Have you seen that Puritan Oil commercial where. . . ."

S: (Interrupts) "Yeah! That old professor is doing a study on serum cholesterol!"

T: (Nods) "Is he your typical professor?"

S: "Yes, and my prejudice is that I expected any college teacher to be stuffy, too!" (Smiles enthusiastically)

T: "OK. Now we're rolling. Let's get some of those characteristics down on paper."

S: (Writing) "Old."

T: "How else would you describe him?"

S: "Grey suit, tie, handkerchief. . . ."

T: "Get that down. Any accent?"

S: "Gotta have the British accent! And he'd carry a briefcase, maybe a walking stick, and never talk to his students out of class!"

T: "Write that all down! (Waits) Good. We have something to work with. Now, you said you got this impression from . . . well, that commercial, of course. You also said 'books and stuff.' What did you mean by that?"

S: "Well, I saw pictures in my mother's 1965 yearbook."

T: "Yeah! Commercials and the yearbook. (Motions toward the paper and the student continues jotting down ideas.) Can you think of one more source?"

S: "No."

T: "Anything else on TV?"

S: (Thoughtful) "Well, some programs, I guess."

T: "Be specific. You'll have to cite an exact source."

S: "Then I can't think of any more."

T: "Maybe two will be enough. Let's outline your essay now. What is your thesis?"

S: "That I used to think that all college professors were like this. (Points at list)"

T: "And the origin of this prejudice?"

S: "TV commercials and old yearbooks."

T: "OK. How could you lead into your introduction?"

S: "What do you mean?"

T: "Well, is this just one of your prejudices? What made you choose to write about this one? You need to set the scene."

S: "Oh, I see. I have many prejudices, but this was my strongest when I first came to college?"

T: "Good. Your next two paragraphs will be explanations of your sources. That's right. Hey. A third paragraph might be a case where you were proven wrong!"

S: "I have this one teacher who is totally opposite! He wears jeans and even has a beard!"

T: "There's your next paragraph. Now, your conclusion has to restate your thesis, but with a new twist so it isn't boring."

S: "Like many prejudices go away with experience?"

T: "That would work fine. There's your essay!"

S: "I guess I'll go home and write it. You've been a big help."

T: "The ideas were all yours. It just took a little bit to get the juices going. Good luck!"

S: (Smiles) "Bye."

T: (As student leaves, tutor smiles in satisfaction.)

What you have just seen is a tutor playing the analytical adult, yet a child at the same time. She recognized the student's lack of motivation and confidence and used her own experiences to break the ice, as well as provide an example. The constant eye contact, animated facial expressions, and active hand movements all showed that she was allowing her emotional excitement to take over, and it was contagious. Remember that creativity can only take place in the child ego state, so by encouraging ideas and making suggestions to stimulate thinking, the tutor allowed the student the pleasure of discovery. At the end of the session, the student left feeling much more confident of her own abilities. She was not quite sure why, but she felt the session had been a success. The tutor knew why.

Sandy Smith  
Emporia State University

## WRITING GUIDE-INDEX AVAILABLE

When the Reading/Writing Lab of Joliet Junior College opened in 1970, it already had an index of writing materials which I had compiled from the scanty supply then on the market. As other materials appeared, I added them to the index. In 1976 Natalie Miller, our reading specialist, urged me to prepare a manuscript of a guide-index of useful materials for a writing center, which, she insisted, would take me at most six months to complete. Four years later I decided to try to find a publisher for my ever-growing brainchild.

The manuscript spent a lot of time traveling about the country from one publisher to another via the U.S. Postal Service. Finally, I thought it had found a home since it received four very positive reviews and spent a year with one publisher. However, the firm was sold, a division was phased out---and so were the plans to publish my guide-index.

At that point I decided to self-publish a limited edition (limited to the amount of money that I had available) and share it with my professional friends for my printing and shipping expenses. **THE BAKER'S DOZEN PLUS: A GUIDE-INDEX TO USEFUL MATERIALS FOR A WRITING CENTER** (157 pages) with a comprehensive table of contents and index is now ready. An unbound, triple-punched, 8 1/2 inch by 11 inch book, its format lends itself to updating and expanding by the user, who can bind it in whatever type of form best suits individual needs.

The eight major parts of the resource are as follows: Part I: Major Writing Problems; Part II: Minor Writing Problems; Part III: Matters of Style; Part IV: Punctuation/Capitalization; Part V: Spelling; Part VI: Individual Resources: Paragraphs/Essays (with exercises on writing principles for paragraphs and essays included plus classified paragraph and essay guided writing assignments including literary papers); Part VII: Study Skills (limited to the dictionary, thesaurus, general library skills, and outlining); Part VIII: Annotated Bibliographies of Resources.

Readability levels are indicated for a substantial number of resources from Grade 2 up. Some ESL resources are listed. The emphasis of this resource is upon self-help materials with answers in books or on accompanying tapes. It includes materials published through May, 1984.

The guide-index can be ordered from me at the address at the end of this article. Please include a SSAE for shipping confirm-

ation or return of your check in case the printing is sold out. The price including shipping and insurance for Fourth Class, Book Rate is \$14.00. Regretfully, I cannot afford to give away examination copies.

A limited edition of a second volume of this resource is planned including the following classified indexes: spelling demons, punctuation marks, and capitalization rules.

Myra J. Linden, ASC  
Joliet Junior College  
1216 Houbolt Rd.  
Joliet, Illinois 60436

---

## DEVELOPMENTAL ED CONFERENCE

New Jersey Association of Developmental Educators announce their Fall Conference, November 2, 1984 in Clark, New Jersey. This conference's attendees will participate in 9 workshops dealing with remediation of reading, writing, mathematics and oral language skills of college students. Faculty, counselors and administrators of college programs will hear presentations concerned with developing tutoring skills, critical thinking skills, computer assisted instruction and related topics. For registration information, contact A. Ulesky, Learning Center, Caldwell College, Caldwell, New Jersey 07006.

---

## ARTICULATION ANYONE?

At Utah State University, the writing center is part of the articulation program between the university and the high schools in the area. Some of the things we have done include having high school students visit the writing center to work with the tutors on editing their essays and having university teachers work in the high schools demonstrating techniques in peer editing. In addition, students from high school classes correspond with the freshman composition students, and high school teachers are part of the grading team for the university freshman placement exam. We would like to know what other kinds of exchanges are going on between high schools and colleges in other areas. Would you help us by writing and describing your articulation program? Thank you.

Joyce Kinkead & Jan Ugan  
Department of English, UMC 32  
Utah State University  
Logan, UT 84322  
Phone: (801) 750-2725

---

---

# TUTOR'S CORNER

## OBJECTIVITY IN TUTORING

Objectivity is important in tutoring sessions. When a tutor is helping a fellow student, she should be aware that personal viewpoints, biases and value judgements may permeate a tutoring session; the tutor might be prone to attack the tutee's ideas rather than to aid in presenting those ideas. A student might enter the writing center with a paper you find disagreeable (the structure, order of presentation, etc., as well as the ideas presented--maybe even the title). While beliefs are strong and impossible to totally forget, try to remain as impartial as possible. Objectivity will enhance your skills as a tutor and leave the tutee with a paper that will reflect his own beliefs.

I have always considered myself open-minded and willing to listen to others. However, when I became a tutor, I realized how rigid my own beliefs could be. My first experience with this was in our tutor training class when we discussed a sample paper with our professor. The paper dealt with the importance of a strong defense and reinstating the draft. Immediately, I took a dislike to the paper and thought, "oh brother, another one of these warmongers trying to convince me that war is good. When will these people come out of the nineteenth century and realize we are killing each other off?" The author presented no convincing arguments, and I reluctantly plodded through the paper. When the class finished, we discussed the paper as a group. I felt as if there was nothing to discuss; the paper would have to be forgotten. I certainly would not want to help some guy writing a paper about the importance of sending teen-age boys to their deaths. If this were a tutee, however, would I be able to berate him for his opinions and send him away? If I expressed attitudes demoralizing a tutee, that would certainly be inappropriate for a tutoring session. A student approaching me for guidance, placing trust in me, would surely be discouraged, angry, and even resentful.

The paper was unconvincing and therefore unsuccessful. My goal in the tutoring session should be to help the writer improve the paper and make it successful. Many different strategies could be pursued. One simple way of remaining objective and not influencing the paper would be to tell the

tutee that I totally disagree with his paper, the ideas will never make sense to me no matter how they are presented, and he will not benefit from showing me the paper. While this strategy shows my honesty, telling him to leave means that I am not fulfilling my obligation as a member of a writing center. The tutee came looking for help with a paper and the tutor's responsibility is to help that tutee.

The second strategy for remaining objective would be to the mutual benefit of that tutee and tutor. Remain opposed to the opinions being presented, but leave your mind open to the arguments being explored. The tutor, if the tutee has an effective paper, may be enlightened by new arguments. If the paper is not effective, probe the arguments being presented and let the tutee think of the relevant points himself. Eventually, through questioning the tutee, the major arguments should surface. Often, a tutee will write a paper and not discuss the strongest points, but if he defends his viewpoint, he will think of the best arguments. By keeping an open mind, you can help the writer develop the paper in the most convincing way while simultaneously having the opportunity to learn from the ideas being presented.

A third method involves discarding personal opinions and siding with the tutee. By taking the tutee's viewpoint, the tutor will also be able to learn about the opposite side of an argument. Again, the tutor should ask the tutee questions about what the issue is really all about. But instead of trying to cause the tutee to defend his arguments, imply that the arguments are not strong enough. Try to take an extreme view, encourage the tutee to back up his points, show him that a firmer stand is necessary. By doing this, the tutor is committed to helping the tutee present the strongest paper possible.

Recently, I had an opportunity to try a variation on the third strategy presented. The tutee came in with a paper presenting an issue I find totally abhorrent: sidearms for armed services personnel. I feel guns should be abolished and have no use in modern society. However, my tutee presented a paper about the need for the military to switch from a .44mm pistol to a .9mm pistol.

Immediately, I realized the paper was not directed at an audience feeling the way I do. Instead, I imagined being a defense department bureaucrat, listening to arguments on both sides of the issue. The problems with his paper were clarity and organization, so I asked the student which arguments were the strongest and clearest and how he wanted them presented. If the paper was effective, I told him I would want the armed forces to switch to using a .9mm pistol.

The experience illustrated to me that I could be an effective tutor by leaving my opinions aside. The session ended with the student's paper being a reflection of his viewpoints and not a dissolving of his arguments with my criticisms. The student left the writing center encouraged that efforts to improve his writing were useful and that he received the needed direction from an impartial peer.

These three strategies apply to papers where the tutor disagrees with the point of view being expressed in the tutee's paper. But objectivity can also be a problem if the tutor tries to impose guidelines on a student. For instance, I may feel an argumentative paper should start with the thesis, continue with the strongest argument, present and address the opposing viewpoints, and end with a strong conclusion. The tutee, however, begins by introducing the issue, slowly leads up to his main arguments and does not present opposing viewpoints. Neither style can be considered right. Many approaches can be taken to papers; the right approach is the one most effective in conveying the ideas to the reader.

The writing center is a place where students can informally discuss papers. By remaining objective a tutor will avoid discouraging a student from coming to the writing center. Students need a place where their papers will be read impartially, free from criticism. The goal is to provide guidance and direction to help the tutees express themselves.

Marc Hartstein  
Peer Tutor  
University of Vermont

BOOK REVIEW

William Strong of sentence-combining fame has done it again. His new Practicing Sentence Options (Random House, 1984) is the answer to a lot of my prayers as a

writing lab director at Colby Community College, and I have a feeling I'm not the only one who's been praying. So maybe I can help a few other frustrated souls out there by sharing what I've discovered since I opened that brown paper package from Random House last January.

First, let me give you an overview of this slender volume (151 pages total). Applying his background in sentence combining, Strong includes both closure exercises and open exercises in his new book. Closure exercises provide cues or hints to help students combine each kernel cluster into three different, fluent, grammatically correct writeouts. (Students write out complete sentences in their notebooks; they don't just fill in the blanks.) Consider the following example:

- 1.1. Vitamin E is a nutrient.
- 1.2. The nutrient is fat-soluble.
- 1.A. Vitamin E \_\_\_\_\_ nutrient.
- 1.B. Vitamin E \_\_\_\_\_ that \_\_\_\_\_.
- 1.C. Vitamin E, \_\_\_\_\_, is \_\_\_\_\_.

Such exercises are especially helpful when students begin working with new or more complex sentence patterns. And while they write these sentences, students practice fluent syntax and learn punctuation intuitively. The main portion of the book begins with a section of eight such closure exercises.

Section 2 of the book contains eight open exercises; that is, kernel sentences are given, but students have no cues for combining each cluster into three possible writeouts. The first section taught a variety of sentence patterns, and now the second section of open exercises gives students a chance to try their wings--to venture forth with sentences of their own. Section 3 returns to eight closure exercises (to reinforce patterns from section 1 and to teach new patterns), and section 4 finishes up the book with eight more open exercises (a final chance for students to branch out on their own and prove themselves).

What I like best about Strong's book, however, is the setup of each individual exercise, whether closure or open. Unlike the usual strain of books designed to develop sentence skills, Practicing Sentence Options isn't limited to typical sentence-

level instruction. First, each exercise begins with an actual writing situation taken from across the curriculum. For example, one exercise begins, "As part of a nutrition unit, your health instructor asks you to prepare a brief summary of a single vitamin, focusing on how it affects the body's functioning." Then, with that writing assignment in mind, the student is presented with a brief prewriting strategy for that particular piece of writing. Thus, students are exposed to a variety of prewriting options: lists, brainstorming clusters, research notes, questions, sketchy outlines, and so on. Only then, after a context has been established and prewriting demonstrated, does Strong go on to provide the sentence combining activities. After combining the kernels, students select the best sentence from each group of three writeouts, basing each decision on such considerations as fluency, clarity, conciseness, and variety. Then students copy the selected sentences to form a paragraph or essay that fulfills the given writing assignment. Hence, unlike so many other sentence-skill books, this one has students dealing with real, believable sentences--sentences that are not isolated, but that work together as do real sentences in the real world.

Finally, after working with someone else's writing assignment, the student gets one of his or her own. At the end of each exercise is a writing challenge such as this one: "Prepare a short set of research notes on another vitamin that you would like to learn about. Develop a paragraph like the one on vitamin E--that is, one that discusses how the vitamin's absence (or presence) causes certain effects." This final aspect of each exercise illustrates Strong's desire for students not only to master sentence skills, but also to move beyond the sentence level to fulfill the demands of purpose and audience.

How do I implement such a book in the writing lab? First of all, I try to use it at least once a week in the basic writing class I teach in the lab. The first time or two, we do much of the work as a class. We do the first few writeouts on the overhead; then students do the remaining writeouts in their notebooks while I circulate around the room. When it comes time to select the best sentences, we talk about the advantages and disadvantages of each writeout, and I write the selected sentence on the overhead. I read the paragraph

aloud after adding every sentence or two so that we can hear how the paragraph is flowing. (I am hoping that students will pick up that strategy during their own composing.) Also, I occasionally talk about certain writing conventions, especially punctuation, as we discuss the various sentence patterns. At the end of the class session, I may or may not assign the writing challenge. If I do, students first follow the prewriting strategy modeled in the exercise.

In the less structured atmosphere of the writing lab itself, Practicing Sentence Options is just as valuable. Because of its broad scope, Strong's book can be pulled off the shelf for students with problems ranging from run-ons to lack of sentence variety to inadequate development (the prewriting suggestions help here). And the book works equally well for drop-in students as well as contract students (requiring a series of visits). Drop-ins usually work through one closure exercise followed by an open exercise. Students visiting the lab on a regular basis can perhaps work through the entire first two sections (closure followed by open), completing writing assignments as the tutor sees fit. Or contract students could even work through all four sections, as time allows. At any rate, the book's format is flexible enough to accommodate the fluctuating demands of a writing lab, and its slender size makes it almost friendly--not too formidable for the easily intimidated struggling writer. Furthermore, the instructions and the exercises are simple enough that a student can begin writing sentences and manipulating the language almost immediately.

So there you have it--an easy-to-use, pedagogically sound resource for the lab. And as if that weren't enough, the book is cheap (about \$5.00) and reusable, since students write out complete sentences in their notebooks and don't fill in the blanks or write in the book. In fact, the cover itself bears this notice: "This is not a workbook. Do not write in this book." In these times of declining skills and declining budgets, I recommend William Strong's Practicing Sentence Options as one bargain that really works in the writing lab setting.

Cheryl Hofstetter Towns  
Colby Community College

Membership Application  
National Writing Centers Assembly

Membership is open to anyone interested in writing centers. Although NWCA is an assembly of the National Council of Teachers of English, members do not necessarily have to belong to the parent organization.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing Address \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

Make check or money order payable to NWCA and mail with this form to:

Joyce Kinkead, Executive Secretary  
National Writing Centers Assembly  
Department of English, UMC 32  
Utah State University  
Logan, UT 84322  
Phone: (801) 750-2725

Membership options:

\_\_\_\_\_ \$15 (includes membership plus subscriptions to  
Writing Lab Newsletter and The Writing Center  
Journal)

\_\_\_\_\_ \$10 (includes membership plus subscription to  
Writing Lab Newsletter)

\_\_\_\_\_ \$10 (includes membership plus subscription to  
Writing Center Journal)

\_\_\_\_\_ \$5 (includes membership; \$1 from each membership  
fee will be donated to the appropriate regional  
writing center association)

WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER  
Muriel Harris, Editor  
Dept. of English  
Purdue University  
West Lafayette, IN 47907

