

UWC MONTHLY

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March 2012

Professors and tutors discuss writing in different disciplines

As tutors, our job is to give students the tools they need to produce good writing. But, what is good writing? A very general answer might be that good writing is writing that is likely to achieve its purpose. However, different disciplines have different purposes and different methodologies for achieving those purposes. For this reason, it is unwise to take a “one size fits all” approach to tutoring. Tutors ought to have some knowledge of the styles and purposes of different disciplines in order to provide students with meaningful feedback on various kinds of writing.

To address this need, the UWC had its first Disciplinary Writing Panel on March 23, 2012. The panel consisted of professors from education, biology, history, social work, business and ISAT. Each member of the panel gave a short presentation on writing in their field. Those presentations were followed by a question and answer period with the

audience of current UWC tutors and tutors in training.

While each discipline has a few things that make it unique, all of the represented disciplines were able to agree on three core values. First, writing should be as clear and concise as possible. Secondly, writers should support their claims with argument and/or outside sources. Thirdly, writers should be clear about the importance or relevance of their paper to their audience; they should answer the “so what?” question.

Dr. Steven Reich revealed that passive voice is particularly problematic for history papers; using the passive voice can hide the actor. To really understand history, it’s important to focus on the people who have influenced the world. By using the passive voice, a writer suggests that things simply happen, which is very rarely the case in history.

Dr. Nancy Poe explained that some writing in social work tries to

avoid making claims or arguments. When writing a case study (a description of a certain event or situation that is of interest to social workers), students should avoid coming to their own conclusions and should instead present their observations in an objective and unassuming way.

The panel appeared to be beneficial for the tutors—“More than verb tenses and punctuated citations, teachers want students to communicate something. This is the hope they have when they spend hours grading papers that students spend hours writing. As tutors, we can also push students toward original thoughts. It’s not quick or easy, and we’ll probably have to fix a few commas along the way, but it’s the purpose of writing across all disciplines,” said Kara Myren, a UWC peer tutor.

The UWC plans to follow up on the disciplinary writing panel by hosting similar events in the future.

-Justin Thurston, Peer Tutor



The Magic Numbers

Wilson Hall consultations: 276

Carrier Library consultations: 47

East Campus Library: 25

Online consultations: 1

Total: 349

Workshops conducted: 3

Students and faculty attending: 88

Overall web site hits: 4,700

Resource downloads: 41

Total # of writers helped in March: 478



University Writing Center

Psychology majors expand the expertise of the Writing Center

Although training prepares University Writing Center tutors to work with students across subject areas, background knowledge proves beneficial during sessions. And with most peer tutors seeking WRTC or English degrees, sophomore psychology majors Caroline Prendergast and Adrian Jarvis bring a much-welcomed diversity to the team, offering a deeper understanding of scientific writing useful to those students seeking content-specific advice.

Both Prendergast and Jarvis acquired a familiarity with APA style through introductory psych courses, providing an advantage when working with scientific writing. Prendergast, who, in addition to her peer tutoring position, works in the psychology department as a Writing Fellow for a research methodology course, asserts that a scientific background not only helps in guiding students with the rules pertaining to “ins and outs of APA citations, running headers, and figure pages,” which any tutor can access through the manual, but also in recognizing issues of clarity and precision.

“The difficult part of scientific writing is writing in a way that is extremely clear,” Prendergast explains. “When you publish a study, you’re writing it so that someone can replicate it exactly, so you can’t have any ambiguity or any confusing language.”

Through her experiences as both a tutor and a writing fellow, Prendergast notes that students often struggle with operational definitions. “It’s important that every variable and test and tool has a precise definition assigned to it,” Prendergast says. “Sometimes students will think that they’ve adequately explained something, but it won’t be coming across clearly. And that is where the tutor can step in and help.”

Prendergast recognizes that it may be challenging for humanity-based tutors to work with scientific writers since the style demanded by scientific writing may not translate to other disciplines. “One thing that I feel like other people miss when working with psychology students is the fact that scientific writing can be formulaic,” Prendergast says. “This style can seem repetitive and dull to non-science students, but that’s how it’s supposed to be.”

To overcome this misunderstanding, Prendergast recommends that peer tutors familiarize themselves with scientific style by reading a research paper or lab report to get a feel for the language. She also recommends that tutors use sample papers as a guide for formatting and tone during sessions, which would allow for both the tutor and the student to get a sense of expectations.

While serving as a peer tutor in the UWC, Jarvis has only encountered a few sessions dealing with scientific writing; however, like Prendergast, he identified clarity to be the central issue in these sessions. Jarvis argues that, in this way, science-based sessions are no different than any other session.

Stressing the importance of open dialogue in all sessions, Jarvis says, “No matter the discipline, tutors need to engage students in conversation and have them explain both what they meant by a certain phrase and what their professors are expecting from them.” Although Jarvis hasn’t had many opportunities to apply his psychology background to tutoring sessions, he hopes to in the future.

“I am definitely confident working with APA style reports,” Jarvis says. “And I hope more and more students in the sciences visit the UWC and recognize that we can help them with anything they have.”

-Kaitlyn Schmit, Peer Tutor

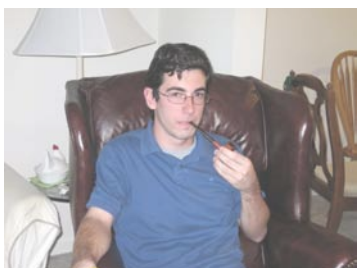


Psychology Major Writing Tutors, Caroline Prendergast and Adrian Jarvis.

UWC alumnus Mike Kern pursues an MFA and prepares to teach

Alumnus Michael Kern owes his two years spent tutoring at the UWC to his instincts.

While in a class led by WRTC professor Mark Thomas, Kern was overcome with the impulse to ask a question: “How can I get involved in writing on campus?”



“When I think back on it, I hadn’t thought about asking the question until after I’d already asked it. I was completely following a whim,” said Kern. “I didn’t consider myself a writer at the time, even though I knew I could write well enough for class.”

When Thomas suggested that Kern take the Tutoring Writing class, he took the advice, and thus his involvement with tutoring began.

Kern was a tutor for the last two years of his time at JMU as an English major. Prior to his UWC years, Kern said he “wasn’t even remotely a good student.”

“I was simply coasting through my classes, doing well enough, but in no way thriving,” said Kern.

However, the UWC changed Kern’s perspective, and allowed him to be engaged in a way that excited him.

“It was not until I started trying to help other students

with their writing that my own writing started to flourish,” said Kern.

Through both the fun and exhilarating connection that Kern shared with students while he tutored, he learned that working to recharge their creative batteries in turn made him realize the potential energy that he had.

“I don’t feel bad saying that I completely took advantage of that energy,” said Kern.

Because of this, Kern is baffled by the enjoyment that he could get from a job. He said when he looks back on it, it all seems “too easy.”

“They paid me to talk to students about writing all day? Honestly, I’d have done it for free if I knew it would have gotten me to where I’m standing today,” said Kern. “That, and if I could have afforded groceries otherwise.”

Currently Kern is living in Fairfax, Va., pursuing a M.F.A in Poetry at George Mason University. Although he would love to write poetry for a living, he’s realistic about his chances. His plan is to teach at the college level, and he is slated to teach Writing Composition for incoming freshman at GMU starting next year.

-Cat Elsby, Peer Tutor

Erin Lambert-Hartman returns to the UWC

After a three year hiatus, Professor Erin Lambert-Hartman has rejoined the University Writing Center family. Assuming the role of Faculty Fellow at the Writing Center, Lambert-Hartman has returned to work as a valuable member of the Learning Center staff.

Beginning her tutoring work in graduate school, Lambert-Hartman has been working in learning centers for almost eleven years.

In 2006, Lambert-Hartman held the position of Faculty Consultant at the UWC and saw the WRTC department’s conception from its beginnings as The Writing Program. As a faculty consultant, she tutored JMU students for 20 hours per week and taught two writing

classes. The department then changed to the Writing & Rhetoric Department before finally merging with the School of Technical & Scientific Communication to create the School of Writing, Rhetoric, and Technical Communication (WRTC).

In 2008, Lambert-Hartman returned to the classroom as an instructor in the newly established WRTC department.

Seeking to bridge the relationship between teacher and tutor, she began working in the Writing Center in the fall semester of 2011 when a Faculty Fellow position opened.

“I can say that I’ve learned, from being a tutor, that

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I'm most effective as a teacher when I'm able to get students to think about the role they're playing as writers. I find that I can do this most successfully working one-on-one," said Lambert-Hartman. "When a faculty position opened up in the writing center last year, I jumped at the opportunity to return."

Since returning to the University Writing Center, Lambert-Hartman tutors for 10 hours per week and has been moving forward with research within the Center. Along with other Writing Center faculty and tutors, Lambert-Hartman gave a presentation for the Mid-Atlantic Writing Centers Association conference (MAWCA).

Her presentation for the MAWCA conference examined the form and function of learning centers in universities.

"My research focuses on the environmental design of writing centers and classrooms, and how these designs either support or hinder active learning," said Lambert-Hartman. "Writing centers resemble studios in layout and function, and some studios can encourage critical interaction among students and faculty, as well as more creative learning approaches and deeper engagement with academic work. Classroom design, on the other hand, tends to promote passivity and isolation."

Professor Lambert-Hartman presented her research alongside other members of the UWC staff on March 30 and 31 at the annual MAWCA conference in Shippensburg, Pennsylvania.

The Faculty Fellow position at the Writing Center is only a yearlong commitment, and Professor Lambert-

Hartman will be returning to full-time teaching in WRTC in the fall of 2012.

She speaks to her time within the Center and how it has shaped her academic career—"Returning to the Center this year put me back in touch with my 'roots.' I certainly hope that I can continue to be a part of the UWC for the rest of my academic career."

Lambert-Hartman's great work will be missed as the center welcomes new Faculty Fellows in years to come.

-Sam Nowak, Peer Tutor



University Writing Center

www.jmu.edu/uwc

The University Writing Center offers:

- Free individualized writing help for all students and faculty
- In-class workshops on a variety of writing topics
- Hundreds of writing links collected on the UWC website

Locations and Hours

- Wilson Hall: Mon-Thurs 9-5, Fri 9-noon
- Carrier Library: Mon-Wed, 7-10 p.m.
- East Campus Library: Mon-Wed, 7-10 p.m.



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