

Southern Discourse

Newsletter of the Southeastern Writing Center Association



June 1998

Summer edition



Elvis Sighted in the Center!

The University of South Alabama Writing Center generates two newsletters every quarter. Our director and two writing center specialists write articles for *Write Now* with faculty and staff as the audience, but with *Writer's Block*, our consultant-written newsletter, the audience is the student body. Both newsletters serve similar purposes (public relations and announcements), but their differences in tone, audience, content, and style make *Writer's Block* the newsletter I enjoy being a part of the most. My job is to get our consultants together to discuss a theme and article ideas, and to help with layout.

"We think students will come closer to reading about the writing center with articles like this."

When we began the newsletter about four years ago, we included consulting hours, mini-session schedules, and, appropriately, consultant introductions. In subsequent editions, the consultants offered writing tips, but we felt that the newsletter was not being read because we found many copies left around campus where we had originally placed them. The consultants weren't having fun writing for *Writer's Block*, though they were fulfilling an obligation to me. If they weren't excited by the newsletter, maybe that was why our readers weren't either.

But what if, I wondered, the consultants

could have fun writing the newsletter? What if they could see the newsletter as sharing information in a way that would not result in a predictable yawn? How about something tabloid, cheesy, off the wall, kind of cool, but still respectable? We started focusing on themes for our issues—not themes of organization, or development, or even grammar, but themes from popular culture, such as Elvis, the Simpsons, and Jerry Springer. We added graphics and continued offering suggestions to help students with their writing and to get them thinking about the writing center.

It worked. The consultants came up with fantastic articles and continue to do so. For the Elvis edition, for example, one consultant discussed second person point of view in how-to pieces, such as recipes. She demonstrated her point by reprinting the recipe for Elvis's favorite dish, "Fried Peanut Butter and 'Nanner Sandwiches." For the Springer edition, another consultant demonstrated transitions by presenting a colorful dialogue in which a jilted lover confronted her ex-boyfriend.

The consultants now have fun with their newsletter. They laugh at themselves and each other and try to come up with something more outrageous each quarter. We think students will come closer to reading about the writing center with articles like this. Even instructors get a kick out of it; many have contacted us to say they enjoy the newsletters and use them in class. Still, we have room for improvement, such as adding puzzles and word games. We'll keep working at it, even if it is more fun than work.

Dana Escobio
University of South Alabama

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Editor's Note:

Southern Discourse to Archive Training Manuals

At the SWCA annual meeting in Macon in April, I hosted a session called "Reviving *Southern Discourse*" at which about fifteen participants brainstormed in the best writing center tradition to produce a list of ideas for making this newsletter vital and unique. This issue represents the first draft of what we hope will be a publication that contributes significantly to writing center work.

One popular idea was that *Southern Discourse* could publish and maintain a master list of writing center training manuals or handbooks that the authors would be willing to share-at cost including mailing expense-with other centers. These manuals provide valuable advice and adaptable ideas for writing center directors and staff to consider; they can be helpful both in the training of new center personnel and in the production of a center's own handbooks, brochures, and other materials. With the advent of desktop publishing, many writing center handbooks have a professional look, and others are now available online. Directors and tutors produce useful and enjoyable texts, and annual revisions mean that these works may contain the very latest in writing theory and practice.

I, for one, would like to have a library of handbooks on our writing center shelves, so that when we have questions about what other centers do, we will have readily available resources. And I would be delighted to share my center's manual with others in the hope that we would get helpful feedback and that more people would know who we are and what we do.

Southern Discourse invites writing center directors to send us a copy of their training manual or handbook or their website address, including the center's address and the approximate cost of reproduction and mailing. In return, we will maintain and update an annotated bibliography, publish it in each Winter Edition of the newsletter, and offer it as a part of the future SWCA website.

We will all agree, I'm sure, to abide by the rules of fair use and proper citation when referring to these works or when using them as models for our own materials.

Thanks to all who attended the session at SWCA and offered such wonderful ideas for our newsletter. You will see some of their names and their ideas in this edition. What about you? Do you have an idea for an article? Is there an issue you'd like to see discussed in these pages? Send all editorial inquiries, manuscripts (600 words maximum), or letters to the editor to my new e-mail address (in the message itself, not as an attachment) or fax number below.

I will look forward to hearing from you.

Christine Cozzens, Editor
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SWCA Writing Center Handbook Exchange Program

Do you have a writing center training manual, handbook, or website that you'd be willing to share with other writing center professionals?

Southern Discourse plans to publish an annotated bibliography of these texts and websites (see Editor's Note). To participate in this program, writing center directors must be willing to mail out copies of their manual on request and at cost and should send a copy of their manual to the newsletter's return address. Include the cost of reproducing and mailing a copy of your manual and the address to which orders should be sent. If your handbook is online, send the address by mail or e-mail. Each work included in the bibliography will be summarized, and the master list will be updated annually.



Consultants Consider Disciplinary Conventions

Establishing a Writing Across the Curriculum program within any institution, regardless of size or funding, can be challenging. At the University of Mississippi, we have not yet succeeded in our effort to establish a WAC program; however, the writing center has made strides toward WAC by modeling response methods for faculty and generally endorsing writing as learning.

Our student-centered writing center is staffed by peer writing consultants from various disciplines. As part of their training, consultants are required to study writing conventions of their own disciplines, an exercise which has increased awareness of student-clients' writing needs. Consultants have also demonstrated advantages of drafting and peer response through discussions with their faculties as they conducted interviews concerning discipline-specific writing.

The staff describes their experiences in their words:

Amanda, English: My writing requires in-depth interpretation and effective reference to a text without summarizing, skills which help me to assist students in developing similar skills. My diverse reading has also taught me the importance of a writer's voice. I listen for students' voices and encourage their consistent use.

Collin, History: Recounting the past through an individual perspective makes bias unavoidable. The challenge of avoiding distortion of facts requires historians to attempt objectivity and question authority. As I read student papers, I question sources and challenge arguments as an attempt to stimulate critical thinking.

Jeremy, Accounting: Professional writing in accountancy is based on rules known as Generally Accepted Accounting Principles (GAAP). Accountants must cite GAAP and prove its

application to the practice of accountancy, but modern accountants also write in more subjective ways. This focus on both standards and usefulness influences me to search for proof as well as meaning in student writing.

Alan, Law: I have learned to examine argumentative essays more critically and to ascertain that facts are fully presented and appropriately researched. Creative use of language and structure for emphasis is also important.

Tiffany, Southern Studies: Ethnography requires that I determine the purpose of a study, record thickly detailed observations, provide background, and draw conclusions. I also consider the affect of my presence on a studied culture and its affect on me. As I read students' narratives and research papers, I ask them to consider their influence upon their studies and reports. I often stress the need for more information, more reflection, and more detail.

Whitney, Master of Business Administration: Writing well for business provides advantage over competitors. Business writing must emphasize its goal; for example, resumes and operations manuals have clearly different goals. Audience and purpose must also be considered. As I read student papers, I am aware of audience and purpose and also of the importance of strong grammatical skills.

Faculty exchanges with the writing center staff during interviews concerning writing have increased awareness of the center and its services. Interaction has increased confidence in the writing center's purpose and has inspired better understanding of the benefits of drafting and peer response. We hope that the consultants' models will encourage further appreciation of writing as a powerful learning tool, a lesson we learned from writing about our disciplinary conventions.

Brenda Robertson, Amanda Benefield,
Alan Burns, Collin Brown, Jeremy Griffin,
Tiffany Kilpatrick, Whitney McClintock

SWCA President's Message

My first pleasant duty as your newly-elected president was to thank past-president Christine Cozzens for her Amazonian efforts on behalf of SWCA, which might not exist today without her guiding force. It's a great joy to know that she has assumed the editorship of *Southern Discourse*, so we don't need to worry about it anymore! Of course, we'll all be dunned routinely for articles, so be forewarned . . . and give her what she needs! So, thank you, Christine!

My second also-pleasant duty is to thank Peggy Ellington for the superb conference in April. As a newcomer to her institution, she nevertheless rose to the late call of our desperation, organized in a frenzy, and gave us the flower blossoms of Macon, the beauties of the Wesleyan campus, a neatly structured conference, and yes, even picnic lunches to eat on the drive home. We were all, I think, delighted to be there.

At the annual board meeting we generated a few goals for the coming year. We're hoping to increase our membership through some careful outreach plans and enhance its value by linking it to NWCA membership. Christine promises three issues of *Southern Discourse* this year

(summer, fall, and spring), we hope to have *Focuses* back in place by next spring, and the SWCA listserv is online again (see ad on back cover). My own personal goals for SWCA include developing a project to foster and support new writing center directors and finding an organizational means to recognize the dignity of peer writing consultants as evolving professionals. Finally, we hope to revive the Outstanding Achievement Award.

Meanwhile this summer, best wishes for soft days of saved reading and the writing of at least one article on the cutting edge of writing centers.

Twila Yates Papay
Rollins College

CALL FOR ARTICLES, LETTERS TO THE EDITOR, TIPS ON WRITING CENTER RESOURCES

Southern Discourse is now soliciting submissions for the Fall 1998 issue.

The deadline for completed manuscripts is 15 September 1998.

The editor would be happy to respond to brief proposals submitted by mail or e-mail between now and the deadline.

Send all manuscripts via e-mail (in the body of the message) to

Ccozzens@AgnesScott.edu

Queries and proposals may also be mailed to the editor at the newsletter's return address.



Agnes Scott College student Lee Hayes helps to present "Confidentiality in the Writing Center" at the SWCA Conference in Macon.

Composition Controversy Touches the Writing Center

The SWCA conference in Macon gave me a chance to talk once again with my peers about a challenging topic — the methods used to teach composition in remedial classes. I believed that the way to achieve success with weak students was to use a strictly controlled formula method of composition as opposed to a creative writing methodology; however, after using both methods, I have found that they each have something to offer students.

For many students the formula essay is suitable. Its solid thesis structure, topic sentence arrangement, multiple-point development and clear sentence requirements offer the novice a basic structure with an almost visible foundation upon which to build a concise composition. For the tentative student, the formula essay teaches logical progression and development. I find that over time, some students cling to this method of writing too religiously. They become unwilling, or worse yet, unable, to stretch into other composition forms.

Several of my peers at the SWCA conference teach only by a creative approach. These educators believe that the best way to help a nonwriter learn is to teach through narrative. This method of teaching composition asks the students to tell life stories using dialogue and logical story progression. No limit is set for the story, and at first, little attention is given to grammar. Written dialogue is encouraged, as well as slang and expletives, as part of the student's natural language. The instructor addresses grammar, sequencing, continuity, unity, and flow through rewrites of the story. Eventually, after several such stories and rewrites have been graded and returned, the instructor introduces expository composition - usually because the students must pass a departmental or exit exam.

It has been my experience that the students who have had these creative composition instructors do learn to communicate well on paper, and some gain attention by publication of their stories in local literary magazines or student forums. They do eventually learn the rules of grammar; however, many do not do well on exit exams that require a more structured essay, and often they have to retake the class. These students seem to struggle more in college-level English classes with structured essays and grammar than their peers who received instruction from the formula composition teachers. Yet, students who receive the more creative approach to writing seem to have an easier time expressing their thoughts.

Instruction needs a melding of these two composition strategies for optimal effectiveness. We don't have the luxury to spend time with students to allow them to write in their natural language and style first, and then learn to write in standard English and grammar. I'm not espousing a formula-only approach; however, I am frustrated with the creative-only approach, especially when I consider the impact these varying methodologies have on the missions and expectations of writing centers.

The problem for the writing center occurs when instructors teach the creative process only, leaving the burden of exit preparation on the center personnel. Should the center offer additional material and help to the student to support the instructor's lesson? Or should the center teach new material to ensure that the student passes the exit test? Who has the major responsibility to prepare students for success in the class? With many developmental students, there is such a significant gap between what they know and what they need to know that time is essential. Somehow, we must find a compromise suitable for each student's needs, for the instructors, and for the writing center.

Roseanna Almaae
Darton College

Conference Report: Macon, April 1998

Wesleyan College's Writing Center was happy to host 122 paid attendees at 32 sessions for, by, and about writing centers April 23-25, 1998. An opening reception at the Macon Museum of Arts and Sciences kicked off the weekend's activities, with entertainment provided by Wesleyan's Washboard Band. On Friday the keynote speakers, Kathleen Shine Cain and Al DeCiccio, spoke about writing center lore and about the value of outreach programs for the schools and the community.

Eight institutions joined or renewed membership in the SWCA: Wesleyan College, Armstrong State Atlantic University, University of North Carolina at Pembroke, Surry Community College, Rollins College, Georgia Southern University, Agnes Scott College, and Winthrop University.

Although the conference did not make money, the cost to the SWCA was low (\$468.07). The outgoing president of the organization Christine Cozzens said, "We are extremely grateful to Peggy Ellington and to Wesleyan College for hosting this wonderful conference and for offering to do so when the organization was at a loss for a 1998 site. Though smaller in attendance than some of our previous meetings, with its stimulating sessions and many opportunities for making and renewing friendships Macon was a huge success."

The next SWCA conference will be in Charleston, South Carolina in 1999 and will be hosted by Tom Waldrep, Medical College of Charleston. Further details will be forthcoming.

Peggy Ellington

Graduate Students Discover SWCA

This past April we had the opportunity to attend the Southeastern Writing Center Association Conference in Macon, Georgia. As graduate students at Auburn University and tutors in the English Center, we at first thought that the conference was intended to address only the concerns of Writing Center directors.

We soon realized that the "audience" for this conference was the people who, in a concerted effort, make for a productive writing center: directors, tutors, faculty, and students. Even more importantly, we realized that incorporating the methods and techniques we learned at SWCA would require dialogue not only with our director but also with the tutors who could implement more effective and beneficial tutoring skills. Tutors have as much of a vested interest and responsibility in shaping the direction of the center as the director; in fact, the center can only grow and realize its potential if the tutors participate in this process.

Several sessions we attended gave us some great ideas for developing our center. The consultants from the Rollins College Writing Center shared with us the ways that their center increases campus-wide and departmental involvement in the writing process. They have instituted an "Adopt-a-Faculty" program, which pairs tutors and faculty members from a variety of disciplines, thereby encouraging productive collaboration on teaching writing as early as the creation of the faculty member's assignments.

We also gained some applicable ideas on developing consultant training from Rob Russell, the director of the ETSU center. His discussion of adult learning theory, or andragogy, gave us new ways of thinking about the expectations and needs of both clients and consultants. Following his suggestions on how to use Gerald Grow's Staged Self-Directed Learning Model in consultant training, we expect to enhance our services by understanding our own expectations and subsequently acknowledging that they might not be the same as those of our clients.

Glenda Lee Thompson's and Betty Barstow's session on how the center can serve the needs of clients beyond the immediate university asks both tutors and directors to reassess the usefulness of the center to the community. This perspective causes those who staff the center to recognize the impact our services can have on those individuals we may not even realize need us. Our knowledge and skills can have a positive and immediate effect on an unlimited number of people.

At the SWCA conference, we gained insight into many aspects of writing centers and the people who make them productive places. We learned, and we enjoyed telling our stories in an informed and informal atmosphere. We encourage graduate students to participate not only in this conference in the future, but also in the development of their centers.

Elizabeth Russell and
Karen V. Zagrodnik
Auburn University



Family Reunions

Having the SWCA conference in the spring renews my faith in beginnings, affirming the power of the past year's work, while holding out the promise of ideas to initiate come September. I like the way the blossoms of spring delight my senses, while conversations on writing center practices assure me that we are a community increasing in complexity, comprehension, and commitment to helping students learn to help themselves.

In Macon last month, we reflected on stories, those we shape and those that are written about us. I especially appreciated Jo Tarver's reflections on learning to speak the language of our administrators and Kathleen Shine Cain's calling to mind the stories which both create and define who we are. But we also heard about integrating high school and college writing centers, salving guilt among tutors, and connecting with computer services. Considering the complications of training first-year tutors and the opportunities for building a database, we practiced Zen and tried out virtual tutorials until Tom Waldrep led our writing centers "to the promised land!"

But of all the stories we told each other in Macon, probably the most important are those we enacted together, like wandering through the Art & Science Museum where Peggy Ellington wisely staged the opening reception. (I hope everyone found the musical steps and the Banyan treehouse by the enchanting little black and white rodents.) Some of us compared notes on lost writing centers, commiserated over shifts in funding, but grasped at new strategies. As peer consultant Virginia Uelze remarked to me on the way home, "They made me feel so good about working with ESL students; now I have a whole pile of fresh ideas." Most of all, we reinforced the pleasure we all feel in each others' company and celebrated the progressive practices of student-owned writing centers.

Two weeks after the SWCA conference, still reeling from the remains of cherry blossoms, the genial Wesleyan atmosphere, and the challenge of colleagues to shift a couple of cherished paradigms, I flew off to

Youngstown with two peer writing consultants to participate in the East Central Writing Center Association Conference.

Now I don't pretend it was easy to visit a sibling. Leaving the soft Florida moonlight and sun-warmed gardenia blossoms, we flew through turbulent storms over Virginia to land in a fierce Pittsburgh downpour. An hour later we waded through puddles to climb aboard a deafening prop plane where we sat for another hour awaiting runway space. Past midnight, we checked into the Wick-Pollock Inn, a pleasant Victorian establishment. The next morning, I found myself in the midst of blossoming dogwoods and fresh tulips as we made our way through drizzle to the Youngstown State University campus, where we learned of our bordering sibling's concerns.

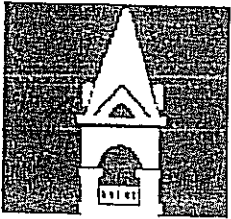
The conference began with two intensive workshops, one on building instructional websites, the other on alternative technologies for composition. By afternoon we'd focused our attention and come to know a substantial number of colleagues. The interactive sessions to follow had a sense of building on an established base. At the banquet that evening, keynoter Mary King carried us back to the founding of writing centers, reminding us of the profound shifts in social perspective during the period of our evolution.

While this visit affirmed my sense that the SWCA Conference is at the cutting edge of reflection and innovation in writing center practices, it also showed me how much good work is out there, how rich and varied our discipline has become.

But I confess to another charm of this family reunion. Returning to our hotel for an uncertain Saturday evening in Youngstown, I found my sister Ruth had driven in from Paris (that's Pennsylvania) to visit for a few hours. We hadn't seen each other for three years. I seem to do better with my writing center siblings! But then, we're all in the same community.

Twila Yates Papay
Rollins College

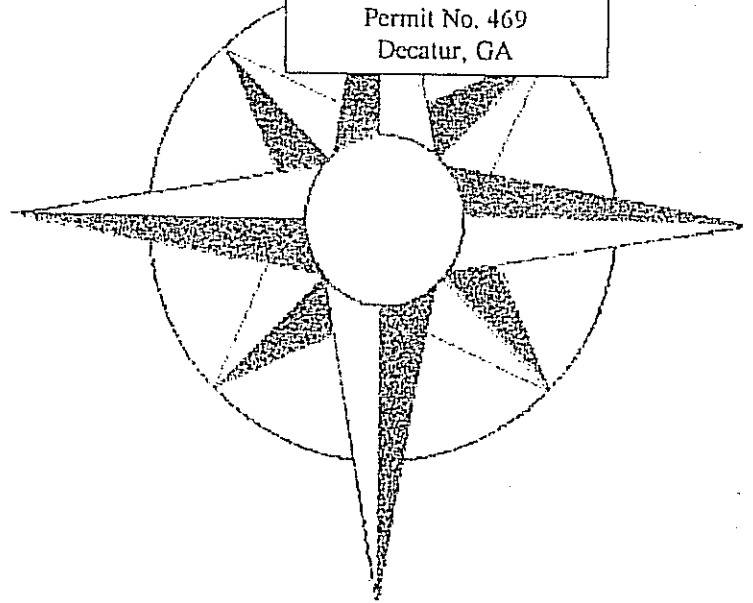




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For engaging conversations about writing center practice in your region, you can join

SWCATALK

the listserv of the
Southeastern Writing Center Association
based at Agnes Scott College.

To join, follow these instructions:

- Ⓢ Send an e-mail message to: listserv@asc.agnesscott.edu
- Ⓢ Leave the "Subject" line blank.
- Ⓢ In the message body, type: `subscribe swcatalk`
- Ⓢ Be sure to turn off your signature.
- Ⓢ Make sure there are no additional spaces or characters in the message.

You will get an e-mail message welcoming you to the list. Once you have joined, address all correspondence to SWCATALK@asc.agnesscott.edu. The list may be somewhat quiet over the summer, but by September we hope to be in full swing!