

20 Writing Across the Curriculum

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Introduction

The Pattonville Senior High School Writing Center is staffed with writing coaches from our English Department. We are open six hours a day with one writing coach each hour. Located in the English wing, the room is equipped with 19 Apple IIe computers and five printers. We have an enclosed entrance way where one-on-one conferencing can be conducted while word-processing activities can continue in the main room (see figure 3 in chapter 4).

The writing center always begins its year with a gala open house party. We allow two to three weeks at the beginning of the year to set up the writing center and to have our coaches practice our most frequently used programs. It is very important that we work as a team rather than as four individuals assigned to a particular hour in the center. Each needs to know what the other is doing if we are to be effective. Our first team effort is the open house. We design and distribute posters, announcements, and invitations. All faculty members and staff can stop by during their planning period since the event occurs for the entire day. Many colleagues use this opportunity to book a presentation or to discuss their writing needs with us. Often we are lesson designers as well as presenters, and faculty have come to expect handouts along with their presentations.

Classroom Presentations

Our most popular presentations involve teaching research skills, demonstrating how to answer essay questions, and explaining how to write book reports for nonfiction as well as fiction books. We always work in conjunction with the requesting faculty member in preparing the

presentation. For example, a chemistry teacher offers a research paper as extra credit but asks the writing center to give a one-hour presentation on everything from how to write a thesis statement to how to handle research material complete with footnotes and bibliography. First, we find out the basic facts, such as the grade level of the students, the size of the class, and the hours needed. Then we ask for sample papers (if available), the textbook, and a list of possible sources the students would be expected to use. The particular needs of this teacher focus on writing a decent thesis statement that lends itself to research and critical thinking rather than an informational report. The teacher also wants students to follow APA guidelines. Our job is to help this teacher's students meet the requirements of the assignment.

We begin the presentation by defining a thesis statement and then by showing students how to take a topic and narrow it down to a statement of purpose. We stress that the research provides the information and that the students provide the analysis of it. With the use of an overhead projector, we explain how to create a working bibliography and how to take notes by either quoting, outlining, or paraphrasing. We then discuss how to properly introduce the research material and correctly use footnotes. A prepared handout shows the standard forms for footnotes and bibliography according to APA guidelines. The handout also includes hints on the organization of the paper: introduction with thesis statement last; at least three body paragraphs; and a conclusion that either summarizes or extrapolates. Finally, we remind students that the writing center is open all day and that they should sign up for an appointment if they would like further help or clarification.

We give a similar presentation to the sophomore world history classes with an emphasis on comparisons. Research, footnotes, and bibliography are also required, but we spend considerable time explaining the organization of a comparison paper. These students are also encouraged to learn how to word process, so their teacher has all of them come to the writing center to type in their introductory paragraphs. The majority of the students return for follow-up visits to finish processing their papers and to get help along the way with development.

Other Services

Another service we offer to our colleagues is one-on-one tutoring of software programs. Teachers can come to the writing center during their

planning hour and learn Apple Writer. They have found this especially helpful in writing tests and then saving them on disk and being able to easily make changes from semester to semester. Another time-saver program that is popular with our teachers is Crossword Magic and Word Search. No more figuring out where to place words on the grid; it is all done by computer. Probably the most revered piece of software we have is a grade book program called Flash Grader that was especially designed by a district patron. We can instruct our teachers in this program in about fifteen minutes and it truly saves them hours of time. Our most recent acquisition is the Test Writer program, a product of Coronado Publishers. It allows for random selection of test items and merging of files for truly teacher-made tests. Another favorite continues to be Print Shop, with its endless possibilities for banners and signs. We teach most of these programs individually, but we also hold mini-workshops after school for small groups of teachers.

Successful WAC Projects

Economics—Problem Solving

This presentation moves the students from topic selection to thesis statement by brainstorming and clustering together. We proceed to formulate a possible outline for a proposed topic. We solicit facts and examples as the best means of development and demonstrate an organizational pattern. We include a few pointers about how to handle the research material and offer a list of transition words to aid in the writing process.

Social Studies—Philosophy Paper

Students enhance their study of history by doing research on great philosophers and then defining their own philosophy of life in terms of what they have learned. For this sophomore class we designed a worksheet with specific areas of focus that the students could use while doing their research. We made a return visit after library time was finished to demonstrate how to organize their notes into a piece of writing.

Home Economics—Nonfiction Book Report

The needs of the Home Economics department centered around getting the students to write a successful report on the nonfiction books they were reading. We first prepared a handout of standard information to

include in book reports, and then we used the overhead projector and a student's rough draft to show how to write the report. We emphasized making subjective connections from objective statements.

Journalism—Newsroom

Our journalism classes learn how to use the Newsroom software package and are thereby able to print a one- to two-page weekly paper in addition to the monthly "slick" paper. Also, our students have learned a program designed especially for yearbooks and are producing the entire yearbook with the aid of computers. Naturally, this kind of commitment ties up our computers. For the Newsroom program, the students are allotted three hours per week and sometimes have to sign up for extra time the same way other students do. With the yearbook program, we have to set up double disk drives and generally, when the students' deadlines approach their teacher makes provision to use the writing center after school hours.

Freshman English—Writing Process

We have made word processing a goal for all of our freshmen. After students become familiar with the writing process and peer editing, they are signed up as a class for writing center time. Here, they type in their rough drafts and receive a printout for editing. After two students edit their writing, they return to make revisions. Their final drafts are often made into class booklets of which each student receives a copy.

Science—Saturation Paper

The annual field trip to the zoo has turned into a profitable lesson on writing a saturation paper. At the request of a science teacher, we designed an observation sheet asking for specific information about the various places visited in the zoo. We then gave a classroom presentation on note taking and, with the use of the overhead projector, demonstrated how to find a focus and organize the notes into a report.

The success of the writing center has enhanced our reputation across departments, throughout the school. As teachers become satisfied with our presentations and see how their students' work improves, they become our most enthusiastic supporters. Their conviction that we are a vital and necessary service to our school has accounted for much of our growth. Students do not hesitate to come to the writing center for help with any type of writing problem from any class. We frequently

get requests for help with extra credit reports from disciplines that do very little formal writing. Teachers encourage students to use the center by allowing them to visit during class time, but many of our students come to the writing center from study hall. Regardless of why they come to see us, we are happy we can be of service to our faculty and our students.