
Writer's Block

From the Writing Center at Prairie View A&M University ·

A Newsletter for Faculty, Administrators, & Educators · · Volume 1, Issue 1 · Spring 2009



Yates examines Writing Center's role

Dean of College of Education discusses new writing initiative.

Ayana Young, a Writing Center consultant and graduate student in the English MA Program at Prairie View A&M University, sits down with Dean Lucian Yates III of the College of Education to talk about his Writing in the Disciplines (WID) Initiative. In the conversation, Yates examines how the WID Initiative could be the catalyst that sparks a university-wide dialogue about the importance of writing and the writing center. Below are highlights from the interview.



Dean Lucian Yates, III in his office at the Whitlowe R. Green College of Education.

Ayana Young: Can you explain some of your initiatives for the College of Education and specifically the writing initiatives?

Dean Yates: Sure. I've been living an ethnographic study here at Prairie View for the last year, and I've been taking notes, watching what's going on, and one of the things that I discovered early on was that for many of our students in education there were some trends in their writing that needed some attention. As a faculty, we got together and said, "We ought to tackle this

whole notion of writing even though you are not going to be an English major, or you are not going to be a professional writer." You have to learn how to put your ideas on paper.

So, we had Dr. [James] Palmer, Dr. [Tonya] Scott, [Professors of English in the Department of Languages and Communications] and others come to our fall retreat, and they did a workshop on the writing process. The expectation now is that all of our faculty will require their students to do

some writing in their classes. The writing can be [anything from] short papers to major research papers.

We've [also] teamed up with the library and their research assistants on how to do the research and how to do the writing, [and] we encourage our faculty to take students to the library for that training... [Eventually,] I hope we could do something university wide.

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Personal assignment, personal reflection

A personal essay assignment helps illuminate the importance of writing and the writing center.

Writing Center consultant and Prairie View graduate student Joy Patterson sits down with Dr. Kaarin Perkins of the Department of Curriculum and Instruction. Doctor Perkins reflects on the role a Writing Center can play in improving student writing. Doctor Perkins coordinates the Early Childhood EC-4 certification program and teaches foundation courses in education. Below are the highlights from the interview.



Dr. Kaarin Perkins

Joy Patterson: We've seen hundreds of education majors in the Writing Center this past year, and many of those have been students enrolled in your courses. What prompted you to create a writing assignment asking students to examine how and why they enrolled at Prairie View A&M?

Dr. Kaarin Perkins: During our fall retreat our Dean, Dr. Lucian Yates, said one of the focuses he wanted to have for the year was to increase writing in all of our courses from undergraduate to graduate. Dean Yates brought in a letter that had been written by one of the graduate students and when he shared it we were all collectively appalled. We all individually realized that our students could be stronger in writing. That [experience] was [a] wake up call.

JP: What was your reasoning for making this essay so personal for your students?

KP: It's hard to connect to something that is not meaningful to you, especially when you are working to build skills. It's really difficult to work on something that's abstract. I hope that this assignment made them think about not when I graduate and walk across the stage I become this person, but what I am doing every day to prepare myself to be this person? I wanted them to read over the mission statement and to read what the characteristics of a Prairie View Man and Woman were and how that was going to translate to them as a professional. There is a standard that has been set, and this is what it truly means: to know that we are an institution of the first class and that there are only three in the state. Know who you are and truly embrace this experience because it is special.

JP: What were some of your learning outcomes for your writing assignment?

KP: I wanted [students] to begin thinking about their professionalism and to begin using the Writing Center as a resource. I felt strongly that if our campus knew about the resources, they were not using them.

JP: Do you think this task of incorporating additional writing assignments is overwhelming for professors?

KP: It can be overwhelming, but there are resources available to us in order to make it easier and less cumbersome. And if we are really striving to prepare our candidates to be competitive and to be productive then the first thing that they have to be able to do is express themselves in written form.

JP: What are some of the typical weaknesses that students have in their writing?

KP: Many students have very rudimentary issues of mechanics, spelling, thesis statements, and staying focused in the writing.

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“There is a standard that has been set, and this is what it truly means: to know that we are an institution of the first class, and that there are only three in the state .”

Dr. Kaarin Perkins

From the Director

The Writing Center opened in the Fall of 2003 with English faculty volunteers in what essentially was a broom closet at the time. The following year, the Center got off the ground with about \$5,000 in Student Allocation Funds, and it remained funded by between five- and eight-thousand dollars a year from Student Fees until the Fall of 2007 when Title III funding helped us grow.

This support has been a blessing. We've been able to expand our services by hiring more peer consultants, purchase computers and software to assist students, offer stronger consultant training, and acquire writing and research materials for the staff and for students who come in for help.

In the last academic year, we have reached over 10% of the university student body through direct one-to-one contact. And if classroom visits and number of students in those classes are taken into account, over half of the student body in the past year have been exposed to our services.

Data collected for accountability and assessment make it clear that we're growing and that we're effective. During the 2008 academic year, for example, we held:

- 959 thirty- to forty-minute conferences with students in multiple disciplines.
- 213 returning visits.

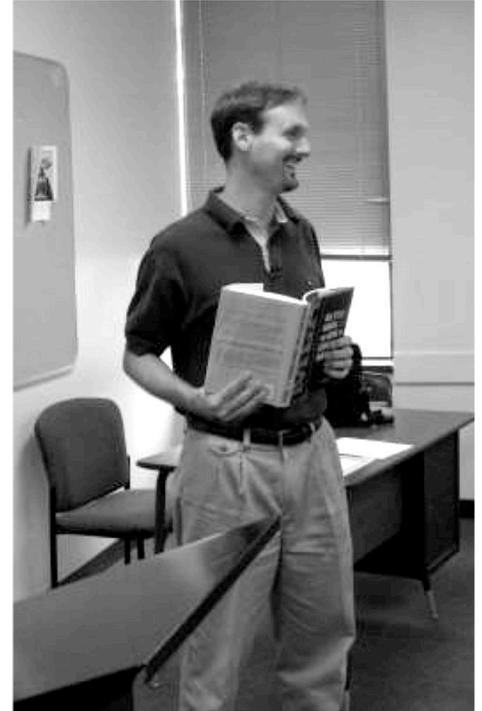
By the end of the year, our student satisfaction rate was 3.87 on a 4.0 scale. In fact, Dr. Shannon Carter, our consultant from Texas A&M, Commerce, evaluated our Center in August and indicated that we were operating using sound practices based on current writing center theory and philosophy.

But what about the bottom line for many students and faculty? Does coming to the Writing Center actually improve grades? To assess our impact, we tracked final grades in the courses for which students came for consultation. The first twenty-five students in March were selected, since this would give a representative sampling of courses in English, Sociology, Criminal Justice, and Communications. Students earned a total of 11 A's, 8 B's, and 6 C's. There were no grades lower than a C.

The Writing Center is helping students earn higher grades. Students coming in for consultations seem to be more motivated learners. Our efforts are certainly a contributing factor to student success.

We have our work cut out for us, and there's much more to do. Our students deserve more educational support and more opportunities to become stronger writers. We're working to foster a climate of academic writing. Let us know how we can support your students. §

*James Palmer, Ph.D.
Writing Center Director
Associate Professor of English*



Under Dr. James Palmer's direction, Room 118 at Hilliard Hall became the Writing Center students frequent today.

“Our students deserve more educational support and opportunities to become stronger writers.”

Dr. James Palmer

Professor encourages Writing Center visits

by Ayana Young & Shashimo Simpson

A session at the Writing Center is a must for students of a Juvenile Justice professor.

Like many of her colleagues at College of Juvenile Justice and Psychology, Associate Professor Camille Gibson, encourages her students to visit the Writing Center because she regards it as a valuable asset for them.

"It would be a disservice to our students if they didn't have that opportunity," Gibson explained. "When I first arrived, several students said that they had been able to get through Prairie View without ever doing a ten-page paper, and they mentioned that some of the classes were so large that professors didn't give papers."

Yet despite the large class sizes, Gibson still assigns papers, though they may be of a shorter length. "I emphasize developing writing [skills], and sending the students to the writing center only helps me out because I'm not a writing expert. I do a lot of detail corrections, but to have someone in the center go through with the student and articulate what the changes are" is certainly important.

The peer-to-peer relationships forged during the 30-minute consultations are tremendously valuable, Gibson feels. Indeed, she requires each of her students who visit the writing center to turn in the draft they took to their consultation along with the receipt from the session so that



Dr. Camille Gibson. "Developing one's writing skills is a must whether [one goes] into the workforce or graduate school."

she "sees some improvement." She is also optimistic that the lessons learned will stick: "I'm happy the Writing Center exists, and that I can send students there, so they can get that one-on-one help many professors who are dealing with large class sizes would not have time to do."

The Writing Center is important to the development of students' writing skills. "At the university level, developing one's writing skills," Gibson muses, "is an important skill; it's a must whether that person is going into the workforce or graduate school. So it's to the student's advantage to do as much as possible while he or she is here to develop as a good writer." §

A dragon in the room

Voice recognition software enhances and eases the writing consultation experience.

A frequently heard comment in the Writing Center is that "My hand can't keep up with my brain." With so many thoughts racing through a student's mind while she works on an essay, getting ideas on paper can be difficult. But, the process may have gotten easier for some.

Technology assists in everything we do, so there's little surprise that voice recognition software has made its way into a Writing Center. Assisting students who want to compose their work orally, Dragon Naturally Speaking is a voice recognition software with over 99% accuracy.

The software allows a student to type their work approximately three times faster than normal by using their voice.

Organizing, revision, editing, and proofreading are still required, but for many the Dragon just might help them compose better than before.

The Writing Center currently has three computers equipped with voice recognition software. §



Not just for English majors

by Brandon Jackson & Keith Evans

The Writing Center is a resource for all majors.

Located in Room 118 in Hilliard Hall, the Writing Center's mission has always focused on fostering a climate for academic writing across campus. Though fairly new and still small, the Center is for students across all majors to come and work on their assignments at any stage of development. Utilizing a diverse staff with specialties in a variety of fields, the Center is available to assist students with concerns ranging from the correct implementation of APA and MLA format to the incorporation of block quotes in a doctoral dissertation.

Chosen for their ability to assist their peers in various disciplines, the Center's peer writing consultants work with a host of different assignments during the course of a day. While many of those assignments will come from English courses, such as Composition, research papers from different majors are a constant presence. From time to time, a master's thesis will need a review as well.

The Writing Center's focus goes beyond academic work, too. Peer writing consultants review resumes and cover letters for actual interviews. Staff assesses resumes using standard 30-second and four-quadrant tests techniques to maximize the impact resumes will have on potential employers. This service alone, visitors tell consultants, is an indispensable and important service to the student body.

Students and faculty sometimes have the misconception that the Writing Center is for English majors and freshmen compo-

sition students only. This is, of course, not the case. In fact, majors across the university utilize the Center's services. A survey conducted in Spring 2008 indicates that of 144 30-minute conferences in January and February, the Writing Center only conducted five conferences with English majors. The most frequent visitors to the Writing Center were Education, Nursing, and Criminal Justice majors. One reason for this is that these disciplines have a more writing-intensive curriculum than others in order to prepare their students for graduate school.

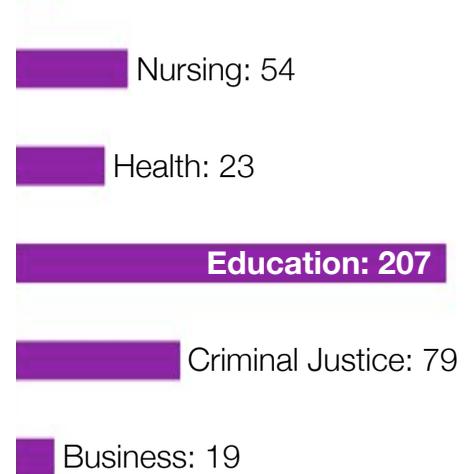
Since students come to the Writing Center from multiple disciplines, consultants need to be well versed in the conventions each discipline requires. The Center received Title III assistance for style guides and software to help students master the differences between Chicago Style, MLA, and APA documentation, for example.

Reaching out to faculty and students, the Writing Center offers five- to ten-minute presentations on the importance of utilizing the services it offers. Instructors will often ask members of the writing staff to explain certain parts of research in order to relate more with the students.

The Writing Center staff is a caring group of diverse students with a heart for helping their peers. They provide a comfort zone for individuals that are unsure of their development as writers and hope to reach those less likely to find their way to the doors of Room 118, Hilliard Hall. §

“The most frequent visitors to the Writing Center are majors from Education, Nursing, and Criminal Justice.”

Number of visits by major, Fall 2008



Writing Center FAQs

A student-centered place for every student.

What is the purpose of the Writing Center? The Writing Center's aim is to provide a friendly, stress-free environment for students from all over campus to meet with a consultant and talk about writing of all types. Our experienced staff is a responsive audience that offers expert writing advice in sessions lasting up to 45 minutes. We work individually with students on any aspect of the writing process.

What is a conference? A conference is an informal conversation about writing. We will explore ways to improve a student's writing skills. Consultants teach students proofreading and editing techniques. The point is to make a better writer for the long term.

What are the first questions students must answer? Students are asked to explain the assignment, its due date, where they are in the process, and what their concerns are.

What can students expect during a 30-minute conference? The conference will be collaborative, engaging both the student and consultant in the process of reading the paper and strategizing how to make the writing more effective.

Why does the student have to read the paper aloud? We use this process because most writers find some of their own problem areas when they hear their words spoken.

Does the Center edit student essays? Because we try to improve the writer, not just the writing, we do not edit essays, nor do we allow work to be dropped off to be proofread for spelling and grammar errors. Through active learning techniques, however, we help develop learning and writing skills students can use in other writing projects.

What kind of goals will be set during the conference? Since it is difficult to re-think and rewrite an entire paper in thirty minutes, students will have to determine a focus. The consultant will ask the student to set some limited goals.

What will students work on during the conference? The consultant will suggest working first on higher order concerns, such as thesis, content, and organization. Writing research supports the efficiency of having writers first clarify ideas, focus and organization without spending time on grammar errors. Rethinking and rewriting the text results in a different draft; the errors won't be the same. Also, clarifying and rethinking often eliminates errors. As a writer's ideas become clearer, mechanics often improve. If we proofread for students, they will not improve as a writer.

Does a visit guarantee a high grade? While we do not focus on improving a single essay for a better grade, we hope that higher grades result. But since improving writing can take time, developing a relationship with a students is one of our goals. §

The Writing Center DOES

- ✓ help with invention techniques such as brainstorming and freewriting.
- ✓ help students understand an assignment and instructor's expectations.
- ✓ provide constructive feedback on student writing.
- ✓ offer guidance with organization.
- ✓ help develop better research and documentation skills; avoid plagiarism.
- ✓ offer encouragement and support.

The Writing Center DOES NOT

- ✗ do a student's work.
- ✗ offer opinions about or suggest a grade on an essay brought in for discussion.
- ✗ proofread or edit.
- ✗ take responsibility for any stage of a student's work.

Feedback on the go

Asynchronous conferencing makes the Writing Center available to everyone.

Universities try to ensure that its students can easily access the educational support services it offers. However, this can be a challenge for universities like Prairie View A&M whose School of Nursing is located in downtown Houston, while its Writing Center is on the main campus 50 miles away. This also impacts students enrolled in online courses.

By contacting the Writing Center through email, students can submit their work for review, ask questions, and receive comments from the Center's writing consultants. Through asynchronous conferencing, students receive written feedback by email as well as an attached audio file.

Digital audio recorders allow writing consultants to talk about a student's paper. They're able to proceed either chronologically through the piece of writing or by discussing a list of observed strengths as well as areas that need improvement.

Audio comments are generally kept at about five to seven minutes. The audio files can be stopped, started, and replayed at the student's convenience on their home computers or transferred to an iPod or any other portable music device.

Students who wish to use this service should contact a Writing Center consultant at writingcenter@pvamu.edu for more information. §

Faculty in focus: M. Clay Hooper

by Jerrell Allen

Dr. M. Clay Hooper, an assistant professor of English in the Department of Languages and Communications, completed his doctoral studies in American Literature at SUNY Buffalo, and had ten years of teaching experience before first coming to Prairie View. His experience has included many composition and rhetoric courses, as well as a number of technical writing classes, so he has since developed strong opinions about the nature and purpose of university writing centers. Hooper joined the English faculty in the Fall of 2008.

Because many of his classes here are in Composition, which students, especially those outside of a language discipline or the humanities, sometimes dread the most, Dr. Hooper attempts to keep classes interesting by assigning paper topics which are engaging and interesting. His composition I and II classes' syllabi include an analytical summary of the famous debates between W.E.B. DuBois and



Booker T. Washington, as well as critical reviews and annotated bibliographies related to broader research topics such as issues of race in contemporary society.

Hooper's support for the Writing Center stems from a belief in communication between teachers, peer tutors, and students: "It is my hope that students come to me early in the writing process so they can be clear about what exactly they should be trying to accomplish in their papers, and then use the Writing Center as a resource. This way all of the discussion is clear and coherent for tutors and students," Hooper said.

He also urged students who may be uncomfortable about their writing abilities to use the Writing Center. "The Center can fill in the gaps for our students—people with grammar, syntax, and composition problems really require the one-to-one attention that the faculty often does not always have the time to provide," Hooper added.

Hooper cautions students against merely seeing the resource as a "fix-it" shop: "Hopefully my students won't come to see it that way. Most of the time, I think many students don't understand all of the things their peers in the Writing center can help them with. As they develop and become more experienced using collaborative resources, students and teachers will begin to see the kind of improvement we want to see." §

&mpersand: *Jerrell Allen*, writing consultant

by *Keith Evans*

Jerrell Allen comes from a tiny town on the tip of Northeast Texas called Sulphur Springs, and for him, Prairie View A&M University was one of his first college choices. PVAMU fulfilled Jerrell's desire to attend an Historically Black University that was in a rural area, and he often states: "I picked the best one in the state!"

Jerrell was approached about employment in the Writing Center by Dr. James Palmer during his second semester. Jerrell felt it was a terrific opportunity to hone his own writing skills, improve his teaching techniques, and give him a chance to help out his fellow students. Jerrell jokingly adds: "It also helped that it was a chance to make a little capital on the side to curb my spending-all-of-my-parents'-money addiction."

Jerrell plans to teach as a profession one day and believed that working with the Writing Center was the perfect way for him to gain relevant experience. Before he interviewed and later accepted the position, he was the one person amongst his friends to whom all would go to for advice in writing. He wished to share his passion and knowledge with the general student body.

Since the time Jerrell joined the staff, the Writing Center has undergone several changes, and everything has been for the better. The PVAMU Writing Center now has far more resources—computers, more knowledgeable staff, and handouts—which are able to help students more. In his own words: "I love the Writing Center environment... it's a place a lot of really intelligent and perceptive people gravitate to. There are many students who come in just to discuss the day's news or some philosophical conundrum they've been struggling with."

Dedicated to research and writing, Jerrell presented at a national conference last year on writing centers and race at the University of Illinois-Chicago. Although it was his first conference and presentation, his rural background and experience at an HBCU gave him insight into what he wished to present and by all accounts did exceptionally well.

Focusing mainly upon his own experiences with the way the African-American dialect is marginalized in modern academics, he argued for a broader acceptance of the dialect and a change in the academy. "The topic of the conference [Race in the Writing Center] was really interesting," Jerrell explains, "because it was something I did not consider a great deal in my job... Since I go to a school with a pretty homogenized ethnic makeup, I almost felt like there was very little I had to say about how race affected my own experience, but I wanted to hear the experiences of others so I could learn from them."

Jerrell is pursuing his goal of becoming a professor of English. He was recently accepted into the English graduate program at Indiana University-Bloomington, Southern Methodist University, and the University of Texas at Austin, and plans to study literature. Stemming from a desire to give back to his community, he is also interested in participating in outreach programs like Teach for America. §



Jerrell has been accepted into several English graduate programs and will begin his graduate studies in Fall 2009.

"I love the Writing Center environment... it's a place intelligent and perceptive people gravitate to. There are many students who come in just to discuss the day's news or some philosophical conundrum."

Jerrell Allen

Old dialects and emerging pedagogy

by Jerrell Allen

A place for African American English in the classroom.

History has taught us that language is just as much a social paradigm as it is an intellectual one. A common language is a powerful unifying factor for a group of people, and populations are often marginalized if their language is not the same language of the society's power structure. Language is often the measuring rod for social or economic status, but its power is even more far-reaching. In the words of James Baldwin, "To open your mouth...is, if I may use black English, to "put your business in the street": You have confessed your parents, your youth, your school, your salary, your self-esteem, and, alas, your future."

The same is true in any culture, and the great melting pot of the United States is no exception. It is no secret that mainstream American society sees people who speak a certain way as ignorant or somehow inferior. African American English (AAE) is one such victim of this kind of discrimination. Many of our 'liberal' academic institutions, which are usually considered progressive microcosms for reflecting this 'melting pot' ideology, have also acted as tools of repression for certain dialects. In the classroom or society, when most Americans hear African American English, we naturally make a number of assumptions about the speaker (most of them negative). In public schools, students who natively speak AAE are often mistaken as illiterate and are sometimes placed in special education classes that both fail to challenge the students and serve only as

blows to their self-esteem. The students regrettably suffer only because the language spoken in their homes is not the language of the majority of society. Our current views about language only serve to perpetuate the discrimination and exclusion that our society has been trying to reverse for the last 40 years.

Yet guiding students away from the idiosyncrasies of black rhetoric for the sake of their grades does not mean we should suppress the dialect. Our pedagogy should reflect fostering a sense of identity in the uniqueness of style that African American English provides. As consultants, it is important that we make students aware of the beauty and power of African American English, even if success in their respective composition courses means eliminating some of this voice. We have to accept that in the current state of the academic world, AAE and its speakers are still pariahs, but this is something that can be changed, albeit slowly.

Promoting dialectic awareness, that is making students and instructors aware that the stigma placed on AAE and indeed any dialect by the academic community is sometimes nothing more than institutionalized racism, will begin to create this change.

The truth is, our language is very much a part of our humanity, and the progress of our society depends upon our

changing the way we think about it. The goal of writing centers and indeed all instructors of language should not be to protect the ivory towers of the English institution from the masses, but rather to accept the diversity that makes our language so interesting and exciting and enriches our shared language experience. §

"Our pedagogy should foster a sense of identity in the uniqueness of style that African American English provides."

Jerrell Allen

Unblocked:

Links to Writing, Writing Centers, and Education.

Collaborative Writing and Research in Higher Education

www.stanford.edu/group/collaborate

Writing Selves/Writing Societies

wac.colostate.edu/books/selves_societies

Glossary of Rhetorical Terms with Examples

www.uky.edu/AS/Classics/rhetoric.html

National Writing Project

www.nwp.org

National Council of Teachers of English

www.ncte.org

Conference on College Composition and Communication

www.ncte.org/cccc

National Day on Writing

www.ncte.org/action/dayonwriting

CompPile, An Inventory of Publications in Composition

comppile.org/search/comppile_main_search.php

Computers and Composition

www.bgsu.edu/cconline

Praxis: A Writing Center Journal

projects.uwc.utexas.edu/praxis

Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL)

owl.english.purdue.edu

International Writing Centers Association

writingcenters.org

“It is now, more than ever, clear to me that peer revision and critique are key in writing for students.”

– Brandon Jackson, consultant

“Working in the Writing Center has taught me how to think outside the parameters of the normalcy of formal writing. While working with students from all majors, I have encountered many new approaches to writing.”

– Rattchel Lucas, consultant

“I have a conference for all of my papers and coming here really helps my grade.”

– Anonymous Student

“My conference didn’t feel like a tutoring session; it felt like a friend helping a friend.”

– Anonymous Student

Yates examines Writing Center's role

· from PAGE 1

AY: Yes, that's what I was going to ask you. Is there anything that is going to be put into place such as a "Writing across the Curriculum" program?

DY: In [the College of Education] we're going to continue using writing as a jumping off point in education. I told professors that I'm going to start pulling [their students'] work to see if they're [graded] with rubrics. I'm going to start looking at what students have written to see if their writing has gotten any better.

AY: Have the faculty been responsive to the initiatives?

DY: Oh absolutely, absolutely. I tell them, "you didn't go to school to be a writer, you went to school to be an administrator or a professor," and so forth, but writing is part of that. So, let's get some writers in here to show you what you need to do in order to move the enterprise forward. They've been really responsive.

AY: What is the faculty's view in College of Education of the role of the Writing Center? Does it clash with what you expect from them as professors?

DY: No, it doesn't clash at all. It's been my experience at Kentucky State that if I assigned a paper, students could take their rough draft of a paper to the Writing Center and have somebody look at it, give them feedback on what they need to do...to make their paper more powerful. [That's] part of the role of the Writing Center here. [It's] a resource [to which students] can go to augment their skill set.

[The Writing Center is] a non-threatening place for people to go. It's not punishment, but a helpful place that takes the strength that [students] have and builds on that strength. §

Personal assignment

· from PAGE 2

JP: How did asking students to go to the Writing Center benefit you?

KP: It made grading very easy because the second draft that I received was of course more refined than the first draft. Grading writing is extremely cumbersome, so it benefited me for them to get some direction on the assignment.

JP: Do you think students who may not be strong writers may be apprehensive to come to the Writing Center?

KP: I think that when you have a deficiency you know what it is; the fear sometimes is 'who am I going to encounter when I admit this problem?' That's what is so powerful about the services you provide; you are students as well.

JP: What type of feedback did you receive from your students after they visited the Writing Center?

KP: The students said the Writing Center really gave [them] information that [they] may not get in an assignment [graded by their] professor. They were able to get detailed feedback not necessarily telling them what to do but guiding them to see what they should do in the paper. §



WRITING CENTER STAFF

James Palmer, Ph.D.

Director
Associate Professor, English

Peer Writing Consultants

Keith Evans

MA Student English

Joy Patterson

MA Student English

Ayana Young

MA Student English

Jerrell Allen

English

Eugenia Anyanwu

Biology

U'kevia Bell

Nursing

Brandon Jackson

History

Ratchel Lucas,

English and Political Science

Shashimo Simpson

Political Science

The Writing Center · Rm. 118,
Hilliard Hall · Open Monday-Friday
writingcenter@pvamu.edu

"A scrupulous writer, in every sentence that he writes, will ask himself at least four questions, thus: 1. What am I trying to say? 2. What words will express it? 3. What image or idiom will make it clearer? 4. Is this image fresh enough to have an effect?"

– George Orwell

Writer's Block

*“Improving the Writer,
not just the writing.”*

The Writing Center
Room 118, Hilliard Hall

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A Newsletter for Faculty,
Administrators, & Educators

...

Prairie View A&M University
Writing Center
Department of Languages and
Communications
P.O.Box 519, MS 2220
Prairie View, Texas 77446-0159
writingcenter@pvamu.edu

...

Dr. James Palmer
Director

Dr. Antonio L. Jocson
Editor



PRAIRIE VIEW A&M UNIVERSITY
Writing Center
Department of Languages and Communications
P.O.Box 519, MS2220
Prairie View, Texas 77446-0159
writingcenter@pvamu.edu

