

Writing



Centered

The University of Pittsburgh's Writing Center Newsletter

SHIFTING GEARS

Chrissy Homa

Up until the last two years, the Composition Tutorial (CT) program at the Writing Center was an obligatory course for those students who struggled to meet the aims of Seminar in Composition. For credit, students were required to meet weekly with a faculty tutor to develop the necessary skills and understanding of the writing process.

While the CT program still presently exists in addition to regular appointments at the Center, it has shifted from a mandatory course to a one-credit voluntary elective in which students choose to get extra assistance in enhancing their writing abilities. Since this shift, there has been a significant decrease in CT students, dropping from 114 to 62 for the fall semesters over the last two years. Without the requirement made by instructors, students may be less aware of CT's existence and advantages.

However, as faculty tutor Diane Kerr explains, those who enroll in CT are likely to be more motivated since they must take the initiative to improve their writing. CT still provides the same benefits for student writing.

Nonetheless, CT's voluntary status now puts the responsibility and opportunity for successful academic discourse entirely in the hands of the students. ♦

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Personal Statements: Did You Have a Role in *The Loin King*?

Diane Kerr

Every year the Writing Center sees students who want help writing personal statements for their applications for graduate school, scholarships, or intern positions. Sometimes students have guidelines directing them what to write; more often than not, the only directions are to "write a one- to two-page personal statement."

Because competition is stiff for all these positions, the first order of business for any applicant is to make him or herself memorable. Telling a significant story about yourself provides an effective way to get the

reader's attention and distinguish you from the crowd.

Often when advised to write a narrative, students insist, "But I'm not unusual." Exploring why a student wants to be a pharmacist or study paleontology usually reveals the unique story of where that passion for pharmacology or paleontology came from—who or what

Telling a significant story about yourself provides an effective way to get the reader's attention.

inspired the goal. Beginning the story *in medias res*, in the middle of the action, with good strong description, is far more effective than an introduction which simply "tells" the reader the focus of the story.

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Differences between Chinese and American Writing

Chuqiao Wang, with an introduction by Lynne Sunderman

Here at the Writing Center, we see students from all over the world, but it can be confusing for everyone to try to figure out different cultures' writing styles! Here's a description of the differences between Chinese and American academic writing from Chuqiao Wang, a second-year student from China:

Essays in China are quite different from American writing. First, the structure is totally different. In Chinese writing, writers always put their main idea (the thesis statement) inside the body of the essay. They prefer not to point out directly, or sometimes not at all, what their

ideas are and leave the reader to guess and think about it themselves. Second, my workshop teacher always asked me to show the main idea of the paragraph at the beginning of the paragraph, while this seems quite strange for Chinese writing. This kind of "opening-sentence" will make the essay too simple to understand. Reading Chinese essays is more like hide-and-seek; readers have to analyze and summarize the writing themselves. There is no explicit direction for them to follow the main point of the essay. Third, Chinese essays seem to be more general than American-style essays.

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Tutor Spotlight

Jenny
Johnson



What is the most important thing you hope students get out of a tutoring session?

I want students to take more ownership over their writing no matter where they are in their life as writers.

Why do you think it is important for students to come to the Writing Center?

I feel like the Writing Center is a safe space for students to explore questions about writing in a way that they do not always have the opportunity to do in their day-to-day experiences here. Even experienced writers can come here and express uncertainty or doubt about a piece of writing they have. Everybody sometimes needs feedback and dialogue to figure out what moves are working in their writing and to help them think through the messy process of writing.

What would you say to struggling writers? What do you want them to know?

Sometimes I think we are all struggling writers, but some people are more confident than others. Some students who struggle maybe just make the assumption that there is this one formula or correct way to approach an essay, and they are just in the dark about how to do that, when in fact, every time we sit down to write can be a new struggle. I like working with writers who don't know that they have so many choices and helping them to see how many choices they have. They have all these choices that they get to make, which goes back to taking ownership of their writing. If you don't feel like you are just writing a paper for a professor but you are writing a paper that you actually care about, then rather than trying to figure out the correct way to do it, you might see that there are all these different craft choices that you have the opportunity to make every time you sit down to compose a paper. ♦

Before working at the college level, Jenny taught eighth-grade middle school as well as eleventh- and twelfth-grade high school in San Francisco. She now teaches Introduction to Creative Writing and Seminar in Composition: Gender Studies at Pitt. This is her fourth semester tutoring in the Writing Center.

Personal Statements

For example, an international student came to the Writing Center for help on a personal statement. When asked why he wanted to pursue graduate study, he related the story of his father, who did not have the opportunity to go to college and worked much of his working life in a shipyard. The work was hard and dangerous; fatal accidents were common. One day he slipped, falling several stories, saved only by a safety harness that caught on a beam hanging out over the water hundreds of feet up. It took many hours into the night to rescue him; the father later told his children that while hanging from that beam, he resolved to do everything he could so that his children would get college educations and have more secure lives.

The story did not end there. In a time and place where women were not breadwinners and men were not house-husbands, this student's parents reversed roles. Since his mother was able to attend college sooner than his father, his father stayed home and took care of the house and children while the mother went to school and became a teacher. Eventually, the student and his siblings went to college; several are now in graduate school. The student used this story to illustrate the inspiring role models he had growing up. When he wrote his personal statement, he began with a description of his father dangling in that harness over the dark harbor.

Like all good writing, personal statements not only need a strong narrative, but they also should have a structure—a beginning, middle, and end—often mirroring a student's past, present, and future. The memorable attention-getting anecdote from the past belongs at the beginning. A middle section that further illustrates the student's good qualities with stories and experiences from the present will be more effective than simply listing abstractions such as "hard working," "reliable," "caring," or "motivated." If a student is applying for medical school because she "wants to help people," she needs to describe how she has helped people and continues to do so in the present. A student wanting to study abroad needs *continued p. 3*

Personal Statements

to explain how he is preparing for such an experience through language and history courses, or membership in organizations that embrace cultural diversity, etc. A final section addressing future aspirations and goals for the desired program and beyond helps to demonstrate the applicant's perspective and seriousness.

Here's a list of dos and don'ts to keep in mind while writing your personal statement:

- Do read the prompt if there is one.
- Don't state the obvious: "I'm applying for grad school at your school."
- Do use strong descriptive images describing your experiences.
- Don't rely on clichés: "My life has been a journey."
- Do allow yourself time. Many students write 3–5 drafts and make 3–5 visits—or more!—to the Writing Center.
- Do connect yourself and your interests with the school to which you are applying. Research the school and refer to specific programs and philosophies that interest you.
- Above all, do proofread. Schools will be much more interested in a student who had a role in *The Lion King* than a student who had a role in *The Lojn King*. ♦

Chinese vs. American Writing

We prefer to think about and write essays that are applicable to all of society, or at least the people around us, so sometimes it is quite hard to try to narrow down the essay.

Besides writing structure, Chinese essays like to use nature metaphors to imply the social phenomena or to imply the main ideas which writers try to hide. So before getting into the main part of the essay, it is quite common to find a description of the background or something else which seems to have no relation to the article itself but which later will be shown to clarify the main idea of the essay.

Also, there are various ways to write essays in China. One of the most famous ones is what we call San Wen—"no structure writing." This structure's outstanding feature is that it does not have any opening or ending sentence, or a clear main point until the end. At first glimpse, the reader may hardly understand what the relationship between the paragraphs is, and for the kind of reader who wants the writer to give them the main point directly, San Wen writing may be too hard to understand! ♦

Bursting your Bubble GUM

PET PEEVES OF
GRAMMAR, USAGE, AND MECHANICS
By Matthew Diabes

I could care less about grammar—seriously, I could.

There's nothing quite like hearing someone tell you they don't care about your problems. You finish giving a suggestion or imparting some advice—"Hey, don't mix polyethylene with polypropylene in the same recycling bin!"—and what do you get in return?

"Honestly—I really could care less about..." "You know what? I could care less what..." "Oh, you think I care about the whales? I could care less..."

"Could you care less? Excellent. I was worried you'd say you couldn't care less. So, help me separate these recyclables!" I would respond.

I am always fully prepared for the dumbfounded look I get with this response. If you're going to trash my political beliefs, at least do it in a way that doesn't insult my intelligence. Talk about adding insult to injury.

"I could care less" falls short of correct by just two letters—two letters responsible for changing the meaning entirely. "I couldn't care less" means there is truly no room for you to care any less, whereas "I could care less" means there is some room for the thing to fall in your esteem. This expression is typically used in spoken language and not written, so how often do we notice that those two letters tacked on as a contraction—"could" to "couldn't"—are there or not? I, for one, could care less. ♦

PunctuationRules

Delineating the Dash(es)

"You use the dash too liberally." These were the words of my 12th-grade AP English teacher as the primary justification for the "C" she gave me for my term paper. As a result of this experience, I have developed a sort of fixation with the dash. The dash is one of the most versatile pieces of punctuation in the English language, and one of the most lovely—just ask Emily Dickinson.

There is more than one dash in the English language—there are technically two, and three if we let the hyphen come along for the ride.

Hyphens are dash-like in form but not function because they are used to append "like" to words, create compound words, save on being redundant as in "him- or herself," and break up words between lines.

Next, there's the **en dash** and **em dash**, so-called because their respective lengths are the same as the letter "N" and "M" ("M" is longer). Take a look:

en dash –; em dash —.

Simply put, the en dash is most often used to connect numbers, as in "August 2–4" or "pages 2–6."

The em dash is used for three things: conjunction, offsetting of lists—in place of a colon—and independent clauses—in place of commas—and interjection in sentences—like this! Perhaps I do use the dash too liberally.

So what does it mean to "use the dash too liberally" or any piece of punctuation correctly but inappropriately? Ultimately it is up to the

Matthew Diabes

tastes of the reader and writer to make those decisions, but clarity should be the golden standard in most cases. The dash is sometimes considered less formal—dramatic, literally suspenseful in both its form and function, if you will. How you write is an expression of the rhythm of your thoughts—stay true to them, but always keep in mind your purpose and the audience for which you write. ♦

Creating Dashes in MS Word

The hyphen "-"

This one is easy! Just hit the hyphen key once.

The en dash "--"

Use a single hyphen with spaces on either side, as in 2:00 p.m. - 4:00 p.m. and MS Word will automatically replace the hyphen with an en dash.

The em dash "---"

Use two hyphens without spaces to connect two words, as in this sentence: "Dashes--they're the most versatile punctuation in the English language." MSWord will insert a solid em dash. ■

Since this publication represents an extension of the intellectual engagement that occurs in the Writing Center, we would like to extend that engagement even further. Therefore, if you come across any egregious mistakes in terms of basic grammar, spelling, or punctuation, we would like to give you the opportunity to gloat. Please feel free to email us at pitt.writing.center@gmail.com.

FOR FACULTY

Outreach

Beth Bateman Newborg

A student from any undergraduate or graduate course at the University of Pittsburgh can come to the Writing Center to work on any University-related writing project, but can the Writing Center even come to your students? Yes!

Over the course of a semester, my colleagues and I visit classes across the campus to talk with students about the services the Writing Center offers. At the request of an instructor, we can also speak with a class about overall elements of strong writing and about writing strategies or requirements particular to a field, discipline, or type of writing project. A WC outreach visit might involve questions and answers about everything from comma use to maintaining focus in a longer paper to correctly using APA or MLA or Chicago style. Class visits can address what constitutes plagiarism and cover basic best practices for maintaining clarity and academic integrity when quoting, paraphrasing, citing, and referencing.

A WC consultant visiting a class can alert students to resources (in addition to the WC!) that provide advice and examples regarding grammar, punctuation, focus, cohesion, introductions, conclusions, and use of sources. In addition, a WC Outreach visit can help students realize that writing is a complex set of engagements and tasks about which they should not hesitate to ask questions.

One of the aspects of WC Outreach visits that I enjoy the most is letting students know that, while strong academic writing does require considerable time spent alone, they are surrounded by a community of writers—their peers in the classroom, their instructors, the faculty at the WC—and that this community exists because everyone in the community has important ideas and knowledge to share.

How can a faculty member set up a WC Outreach visit? Contact me at bateman@pitt.edu with ideas about what you would like a WC visit to encompass. From there, we can work on scheduling an in-class visit. ♦

Writers' Café/Prosody Contest

The *Writers' Café* and WYEP-FM's *Prosody*, a weekly radio show featuring poets and writers, sponsors a Pitt undergraduate creative writing contest each spring.

All winners in each genre (poetry, fiction, nonfiction) are featured on the radio show, produced by Pitt alums **Jan Beatty** and **Ellen Placey Wadey**, and winners receive a Book Center gift certificates.

Here are the winners for 2012:

FICTION (judged by Robert Yune)

First prize: **Nina Sabak**, "Something Small and Made of Fire"

Second prize: **Taylor Breslin**, "As If You're Fooling Anyone"

NONFICTION (judged by Robyn Jodlowski)

First prize: **Nina Sabak**, "Little Red Sister"

Second prize: **Brittany Whoric**, "Press Pause"

POETRY (judged by Beth Newborg)

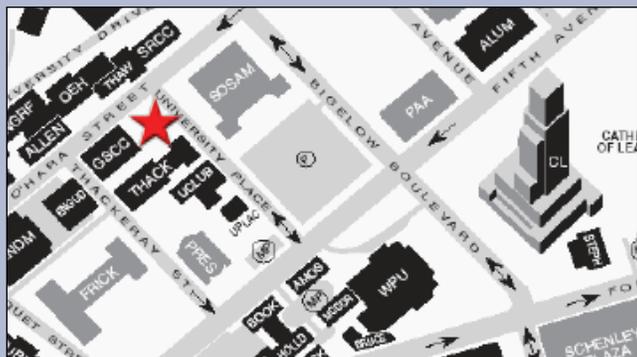
First prize: **Joshua Patton**, "Faking It"

Second prize: **Joshua Patton**, "Drug Education"

Full guidelines for the 2013 contest will be available at the *Writers' Café* site (www.pitt.edu/~wcafe) during the Spring semester. To be eligible for the contest, you must have attended at least one session of the *Writers' Café* workshops during the academic year.

Visit *Prosody's* webpage: www.wyep.org/node/10430

The *Writers' Café* is open to any students who are interested in creative writing. You don't have to be a Writing major. Please join us this term for light refreshments and talks from local writers. You'll learn about craft, meet other writers, do writing exercises, and have the opportunity to workshop your writing. ♦



The Writing Center

317 B O'Hara
Student Center

Hillman Library

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| Monday | 9-7 |
| Tuesday | 9-7 |
| Wednesday | 11-9 |
| Thursday | 9-7 |
| Friday | 9-3 |

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| Tuesday | 1-6 |
| Wednesday | 1-6 |
| Thursday | 1-6 |