People seem to expect that Writing Center tutors do not face the frustrations of writing, as if they magically write papers with a flick of the wrist: “But you tutor!” Well... I'm also human, and I'm pretty sure that this makes me susceptible to everything else that my tutees face, like influenza, paper cuts, and writer’s block. Though I have no cure for the flu and will not be wearing full-body armor anytime soon, I think I’ve found the antidote to ailments.

It sounds deceptively simple, but I just write. It begins with words unceremoniously thrown onto paper: half-formed ideas that could lead to something, sentences that aren’t quite sentences yet, word associations, topics that seem relevant, summaries of useful research. If it crosses my mind, it goes into my text. When I start losing steam, I look at what I have and keep adding until I end up with a giant list of bullet points and sentences. As writers, we call this “freewriting,” the process of simply putting any thoughts—however relevant—onto paper.

Begun in 1999 with Dr. Budny’s philosophy of “write to learn/learn to write,” this course is a collaborative, cross-curricular effort by the School of Arts and Sciences and the Swanson School of Engineering. According to Beth Newborg, Director of the Engineering Freshman English Program, the course has grown from 325 students and 6 staff from the Writing Center to over 500 students and 13 staff. With an emphasis on critical thinking, this course is process oriented and designed to provide opportunities for students to understand and position themselves in the culture and to learn about themselves as well as the engineering profession.

The first semester consists of writing assignments that familiarize students with the various branches of engineering, professional writing, current trends, and twenty-first century engineering challenges, diverse as reverse engineering the brain and making solar technology affordable. Students also become familiar with ethical principles and codes pertaining to engineering. Bondi wrote a first semester paper on fracking and said he learned some “surprising things” about the practice. Both he and Nardozzi said they felt the ethical issues they studied, such as the importance of considering the effect of any given technology on quality of life, would be useful in their future careers.

The second semester is devoted to writing the research paper presented at the mock conference. Students work in pairs on topics of their choosing. Nardozzi and Bondi, who did not know each other before coming to Pitt, said they felt they worked well together and knowing how to work in a team will be an important skill in their future careers.

Brainchild of Dr. Daniel Budny, Director of Programs for Freshman Engineering Students, the mock conference is the culmination of a yearlong English course designed for freshman engineering students, the equivalent of Seminar in Composition, the required freshman English course at the University of Pittsburgh.

Pitt assistant professor Bill Lychack led a Writers’ Café session last year. Participants enjoyed a lively and engaging session despite the snow storm. Writers’ Café meets monthly, fall and spring.
Ronna Edelstein has spent most of her life teaching middle school English and several years at the high school level. She teaches two sections of Freshman Programs in the fall at Pitt. This is her tenth year at the Writing Center. We were happy to interview her for the newsletter.

What can students gain from coming to the Writing Center?

Pitt is a big school. To me, the Writing Center is a gift to the students. It is one of the few places on campus where students can come and have a one-on-one session with a consultant who is dedicating 30 minutes to an hour, just focusing on that student. At a university this large, you can get lost. The Writing Center prevents you from getting lost and lets you know that you are important, that your writing and ideas are important, and that there are people here who care about helping you grow as a writer.

What are the benefits of one-on-one tutoring as opposed to teaching in front of a big class?

I think it is important to have the big class. For example, Seminar in Composition is very important—students get to workshop their papers, see what their classmates are doing, and discuss ideas. But I think the Writing Center is also special because you have this time when you and your ideas are the center of attention. No matter what field you go into, you are going to write—whether it’s memos to your staff or reports—you are going to write. Communicating with others is important. The Writing Center empowers students. It gives students the power over their own communication skills.

What do you want struggling writers to know?

Writing is a process. Anything worth achieving requires struggle. It takes thought, it takes effort, it takes sweat, it takes some tears—it’s a struggle. But you should not give up. It may never be easy—I don’t think it’s easy for professional writers who have bestselling books. There are days when the words just seem to flow and others when you can’t think of the proper word. But I think it’s worth it, so don’t give up.
I like chocolate; I like it a lot. I like chocolate: I like it a lot. I like chocolate—I like it a lot! So which is it? Do I like chocolate enough to warrant a semicolon, colon, or long dash (a.k.a. em dash)? A lot of students have difficulty sensing the distinctions between these independent clause connectors—and it is really a labor of sensing: many of these are interchangeable if we are guided by the rules alone. Following the rules will guide writers to avoid erroneously using these marks; however, it won't help them choose the ones that work best.

“Wait a second—what do you mean you ‘feel’ a dash here?!” It can be very difficult to describe the differences between situations that call for these different punctuation marks. The key is examining the relationships between the independent clauses you are trying to connect. Knowing the difference is really less of an ESP thing and more a matchmaker thing.

Think of the relationship between two independent clauses as a set of scales. Are they balanced? Use a semicolon, as in “I like chocolate; also, I like vanilla.” Does the second carry more weight in meaning and actually explains the first? Use a colon, as in “Chocolate is necessary for writing tutors: it is the secret fuel behind all cogent thought.” How dramatic is the relationship? If the scales are tipped so dramatically that your statement sounds like something a politician would say, use a long dash, as in “Chocolate isn’t just a sweet treat—chocolate is freedom.”

So next time your students are stumped, ask them how much they love chocolate. I, for one, am an em dash.
The Writers’ Café and WESA-FM’s Prosody, a weekly radio show featuring poets and writers, sponsor a Pitt undergraduate creative writing contest each spring. Contest entries are divided into three genres—poetry, fiction, and nonfiction—and judged by published writers. All winners are featured on the radio show, produced by Pitt alums Jan Beatty and Ellen Placey Wadey, and winners receive cash prizes. Here are the winners for 2013:

**POETRY** Judged by Sharon McDermott
- **First Prize:** “All the Same” by Anne Dominique Briones
- **Second Prize:** “We Who Whistle in Graveyards” by Lexi Miller-Golub

**FICTION** Judged by Jen Howard
- **First Prize:** “Le Mot Juste or the Angel at the Trestle” by Elizabeth McLoughlin
- **Second Prize:** “Radio Silence” by Kaeli Hood

**NONFICTION** Judged by Abby Mendelson
- **First Prize:** “Binary and Phone Calls” by Robert Leight
- **Second Prize:** “Yellows” by Brittany Whoric

Full guidelines for the 2014 contest will be available at the Writers’ Café website (www.writingcenter.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 during the academic year.

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. Visit our website for the schedule.

For Faculty

**Helping Students Make the Most of Their Appointments**

by Renee Prymus and Ronna Edelstein

Some students come to the Writing Center of their own volition; they recognize that they need help with voice in a personal statement, citation in a research paper, or cohesion in an essay. Most students, however, visit the Writing Center because caring professors like you have encouraged them to do so. By deciding that your students could benefit from the Writing Center, you are giving them a gift—the ability to become more confident, independent, and effective writers. To ensure that your students have a positive experience at the Writing Center, we invite you to do the following:

- Emphasize that the name is Writing Center, not Editing or Proofreading Center. Tell your students that they and their tutor will focus on the process of writing, not on “fixing” a paper.
- Ask your students to arrive at their appointment with a focus—which areas most concern them about their writing.
- Guide your students by sharing with them what you believe they should focus on: organization, paragraph structure, point of view, etc. Sessions last between 30 minutes and one hour, so students who can articulate why they are at the Writing Center enable tutors to concentrate on the pertinent issue(s).
- Encourage your students with grammar concerns to make a standing appointment at the Writing Center, preferably with the same consultant for consistency.
- Remind your students to bring their assignment prompt and, if available, grading rubric. The more information tutors have, the more help they can give your students.
- Communicate with the Writing Center if you have concerns, questions, or suggestions.

By working together, we can give our students the tools they need to improve their writing skills and enrich their writing confidence.

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.

Editor: Renee Prymus

Thanks to Emily Costantinou for all her help with the newsletter. Emily designed our inaugural issue and spent many hours on subsequent issues.

Visit us at www.writingcenter.pitt.edu

In 2013 we launched International Café, a monthly session that offers a conversation on topics of interest to non-native speakers of English. We offer insight, refreshments, and time for you to chat with other students.