



# Writing Forum

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## What's Going on in the Writing Lab?: A Day in the Life

As Writing Lab instructors, we are sometimes asked how we do what we do, how we survive meeting with six individual students every day, reading, evaluating, and commenting on six different papers, re-teaching the same organizational and grammatical rules over and over. When someone asks one of us that, we just smile. Sure, there are days—notably during finals—when it wears on us, but most of the time it's very rewarding.

Perhaps you are wondering just exactly what it is we do here in ARH 132 that makes us feel this way. Well, here is an overview of how the Lab operates in general, followed by a look at a day in the life of the five professional lab tutors, illustrating the variety of student challenges we meet every day.

Students use the Writing Lab in two ways: they take it as a for-credit class or sign up for individual appointments as needed. Credit students enroll in College Writing

100 and meet weekly with one of the five full-time instructors. To fulfill the minimum course requirement of ten sessions, students need seven or more writing assignments from other courses to work on over the semester. Students who want occasional appointments can sign up with any instructor who has an opening on his/her schedule. If students are unable to find an appointment at their preferred times, they may sign up on the waiting list. When other students cancel, their appointments are offered to wait-listed students. Those who sign up on the waiting list have a very high probability of being offered an appointment; 90-95% of them receive an offer.

A student may visit the Lab at any point in the writing process. Ideally, the student will come for help early enough so that he or she can integrate the Lab instructor's comments into a second or third draft, and although sometimes students wait until very late to seek input, we emphasize that we are not here to provide last-minute proofreading services.

Our appointments with students are individualized to meet the needs they identify. Based on what they

want to do, we might help students to:

- Understand the instructor's assignment as fully as possible
- Brainstorm approaches to a particular assignment
- Develop a thesis statement
- Organize their ideas, evidence for their claims, and main supporting arguments

If they come in with a draft, we might:

- Review it for structure and responsiveness to the assignment
- Help them build strong introductions and interesting conclusions
- Identify weaknesses or errors in grammar
- Assist with rewrites by reviewing instructors' comments
- When permitted by the classroom instructor, review take-home exams for clarity, concision, and responsiveness to the assignment.

In our effort to help students become competent and effective writers, we collaborate with other faculty in a number of ways. We no-

"What is written without effort is read without pleasure."

Samuel Johnson

## Grinnell College Writing Lab

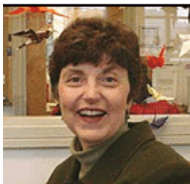
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tify instructors if we are working with a student in College Writing 100 or if they come to see us as walk-ins. We make presentations to tutorial classes on a variety of writing topics and will tailor them to a professor's needs. When necessary, we work closely with faculty to help students who have serious writing difficulties. Occasionally, we have assisted individual faculty with their own writing projects.

Working together, professors and Writing Lab instructors help students who want to become better writers do just that.



**9:00 a.m.,  
Janet Carl**

Kim, a third year student who is taking the Writing Lab for credit for the second time, arrives breathless, a few minutes late, bringing with him a practice assignment from the LSAT study guide. This week he has written an essay in which he argues for the selection of one comic strip over another as better meeting the needs of a large, metropolitan newspaper. In reviewing his essay, I see that he has improved his opening statement from previous efforts; he comes right out of the corner punching, as it were—stating in the first para-

graph which comic strip is the better choice and why. In reviewing the essay, I notice again Kim's tendency toward random punctuation and unsophisticated sentence structure. We decide to go back to basics and brush up on the fundamentals. I identify readings and worksheets from our course packet on the use of commas and subordination in sentence-building for use in our next meeting.

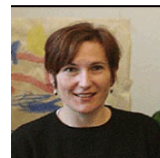


**10:00 a.m.,  
Laura Fendt**

It is just before 10, and as usual, Genny is early for our regular appointment. She has a short paper due within the week for her upper-level Spanish course. As she has done before, she wants to "talk through" her paper in English so that she has a sense of how to best organize her points. We have agreed that it is actually better to compose the paper in Spanish than to translate from one composed in English. I understand enough Spanish to get a sense of her thesis statement, which we then examine, keeping in mind Erik Simpson's "Five Ways of Looking at a Thesis." We decide that her thesis pretty well summarizes an important theme of the film she is discussing and even offers a bit of a twist, but that it does not work very well as a road map: We

have no idea what direction her paper is going to take.

At this point, we go back to Genny's notes. She has picked out several scenes from the film which illustrate the points she wants to make about the theme, and we have a lively discussion about which ones would be best to use and in what order. When she has settled on an outline, we go back to her thesis statement, and she revises it to reflect the direction she took when outlining the essay. Finally, she goes through a list of cinematic terms to make sure she can use several of them in the paper. She checks off the obvious choices, realizes that she can work another into the introduction and smiles. Our work is done.



**11:00 a.m.,  
Claire Moisan**

I have an appointment with Mark, an international student who seems to hold me responsible for a string of Bs on his tutorial papers, but who nonetheless resists most of my advice. When I suggest, for example, that he rethink the organization of his essay, he becomes defensive and argues with me.

"The professor said we did not have to follow his assignment *exactly*. We could do whatever we want in the paper."

"Hmmm..." I just love it when a student gives me the old "Well, *Dad* said I *could*" line. I keep my exasperation in check and pull out my trusty five-paragraph es-

say diagram and suggest that this model might offer him a better organizational structure to meet the assignment. He doesn't buy it.



**1:20 p.m.,  
Kevin Crim**

"If I state the argument right away, then I have nothing else to say. In my country, I learned that you first show all the evidence and *then* conclude with the argument."

"That structure works sometimes," I concede, "but it's difficult to maintain and not suitable in every discipline or for every assignment, especially when the prompt calls for a thesis early in the paper. When you use this delayed thesis approach you run the risk of getting sidetracked in your argument and losing your reader. Kind of like you do here." I point out an example in his paper.

Before he jumps to defend himself, I go on to tell him about how American college writing tends to favor a deductive argumentative approach over the inductive one he had learned in his high school, and I show him how he could essentially turn his paragraphs inside out to better meet American academic conventions.

"Let's just try this," I prod. "At least let's get your thesis into your introduction. We can talk about how to retain your inductive approach in some of your paragraphs, OK?"

"OK," he grudgingly agrees.

We work through re-outlining the paper. He eventually agrees that my way makes sense and seems truly appreciative (or at least mollified) by the end of the session.

My 1:20 student is a regular, a freshman woman with a tutorial paper of moderate length discussing three different methods of community organizing. We soon notice some organizational problems. In two of the three main sections, one long paragraph has focus problems and needs dividing into two; as well, in all three sections, the first paragraph lacks focus and coherence. But, at the end of the draft, we notice that the conclusion employs a three-part analytical structure highlighting the assumptions, methods, and problems of the different ways of community organizing; we then see gleefully that this scheme is perfect to give the necessary structural soundness to the three sections of the body. We're pleased.



**2:15 p.m.,  
Helyn Wohlwend**

I have an appointment with Rachel, a third year student who is a frequent visitor to the Lab, but with whom I have worked only occasionally. Rachel explains that her assignment is a relatively short opinion piece responding to a book on the portrayal of Muslim women in Western media and the truth of these women's lives.

As we begin to read, it is quickly apparent that Rachel needs to refine her thesis. I point out that it currently consists of two sentences loosely outlining the arguments she will make, but it does not indicate

her opinion about the book. Rachel agrees that it needs work, but we decide to read on to see what the paper actually argues and to return to the thesis later.

I soon note that Rachel tends to create paragraph opening sentences that include material extraneous and often contradictory to the evidence given in the paragraph. Specifically, she seems to want to include in every paragraph the argument that the Western media is wrong, and why. I suggest consolidating this material in a single paragraph that she can then refute with the overwhelming evidence the book presents.

Once we reshape the body paragraphs, the argument of the paper overall becomes obvious. We return to the thesis and rewrite it to reflect this new, clearer argument. When Rachel leaves, she seems satisfied, and so am I.

Each instructor meets with six students, one an hour. We see papers from all disciplines and nearly every department. Our hats change so often it's a wonder we don't get rug burn on our scalps. And we wouldn't have it any other way.

"The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug."

Mark Twain