The 2005-2006 year has brought a flood of changes to our University Writing Center (UWC), and this newsletter is one of the first chances we’ve had to share with the entire community how those changes have impacted the work we do in our center. Most notably, the UWC has moved out of Sanford Hall (its home for more than 30 years) into a more central location on campus—the Belk Library and Information Commons. As a result, we’ve increased the size, accessibility, and visibility of our center, and more students than ever are taking advantage of our services.

This move into a new space is also representative of other important initiatives at ASU and within our center that have allowed for a larger staff and expanded services to meet the needs of writers at ASU. New positions in the UWC include a program assistant, an assistant director, and three undergraduate writing consultants. This additional staffing has allowed for exciting opportunities: we’ve been able to provide new workshops for students, to support the staff’s professional development and research interests, and to build stronger partnerships with other student support agencies and services. This newsletter is also a product of the enhanced resources of our center and a reflection the UWC’s continuing efforts to communicate about our mission and the scope of our services. It illustrates exactly the type of self-motivated, collaborative, and engaged teaching and learning that we support in the UWC.

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“One of the most powerful reasons for writing is not to convey a message to someone else, but to find out for ourselves that we have a message and that we understand its shape and content.”
- Toby Fulwiler

We are also thrilled that the UWC is growing into a center of research and progressive learning on our campus; it is a space where making and sharing knowledge is a priority, not only for our staff but for those who visit the center. In fact, the name of our newsletter, The Re-Visioner, reflects our center’s commitment to facilitating writing as a process, but it is also intended to represent our efforts to constantly rethink, reorient, and reconsider how the University Writing Center participates in the lives of our clients—the students, faculty, staff, and community members who bring their writing to us. We’re delighted to provide space on these pages where all of these voices can come together to share experiences with and ideas about writing and literacy on our campus and in our community.

Dr. Beth Carroll, Director
Emily Lindner, Assistant Director
A Letter from the Editors

Welcome to the inaugural issue of The Re-Visioner, the newsletter of the ASU Writing Center. The Re-Visioner is dedicated to writing in general and will explore both the theory and practice of composition pedagogy. As editors of the newsletter, we wish to provide a forum in which everyone is welcome to contribute to an on-going conversation about composition and rhetoric.

We are very excited about the first issue of The Re-Visioner and the newsletter’s future possibilities. The goal of a writing center newsletter could not have been realized without the contributions of both students and faculty, and we would like to thank all of the writers who have helped make this issue possible.

In “The Director’s Chair,” Dr. Beth Carroll and Emily Lindner discuss the University Writing Center as a space devoted to collaboration, writing, and literacy. We would like to offer the newsletter as a continuation of this space– as a place where writers can further their ideas, share knowledge, and experience an environment of exchange.

Until next time,

Kate Frost, Sarah Vanover, and Kevin Young
Editors

Experimenting with Collaboration in the University Writing Center

by Jon Burr

Earlier this semester, seven of our graduate consultants presented at the Southeastern Writing Center Association Conference in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. The conference’s theme was “Let’s Research: Gathering Evidence to Support Writing Center Work.”

On February 17, Kyle Warner and Jon Burr, consultants at the University Writing Center (UWC), presented a workshop entitled “Tension, Discourse, and the Birth of Ideas: Consultant- Consultant Collaboration in the Writing Center.” The idea for their workshop originated during the fall semester from a consultant training exercise. Although not required of new consultants, the exercise brought consultants together into collaborative consulting situations, rather than the usual one-on-one practice. This environment in the UWC allowed for multiple perspectives on a single piece of writing and helped ease new consultants into an unfamiliar environment.

To demonstrate the usefulness of this technique, Kyle and Jon designed their workshop to simulate collaborative approaches to consulting a student’s paper. To accomplish this task, they began the interactive portion of their workshop by requiring all attendees to read an excerpt from a sample student essay and indicate portions of the text where they think they would benefit from the perspective of another consultant. In order to foster discussion and responses, Kyle and Jon sought to challenge workshop attendees by giving a writing sample that was not straightforward, but demanding and unique (written in a dialect, questionable grammar, use of vulgarity, controversial subject matter, etc.). Additionally, during all exercises, Kyle and Jon played light

Continued on page 3
music in order to encourage deep thought and enlightenment.

After the attendees completed the first stage of the workshop, they were given another student essay and asked to form groups of two. In these groups, the attendees read another controversial text but responded collaboratively to a set of questions. This element of the workshop was designed to create tension between attendees, much like that which two consultants might experience over a single piece of writing. Kyle and Jon also hoped that paired responses might represent two different perspectives on each essay, increasing both the quality and quantity of answers.

Since little to nothing is written on this practice in writing center journals and books, Kyle and Jon triangulated the ideas and data presented in their workshop by consulting two thematic groupings: collaboration and group dynamics. To gain knowledge on collaboration, they cited such works as bell hooks’ *Teaching Community*, Kutz and Roskelly’s *An Unquiet Pedagogy*, and several collaborative texts by Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford. bell hooks describes the importance of maintaining a learning community in the classroom, regardless of a student’s dialect or background, and that differences should be embraced, not assimilated into the core beliefs of dominator values. With this in mind, the University Writing Center collaborates between consultants and with clients to provide multiple perspectives on a student’s paper. Kutz and Roskelly emphasize the usefulness of group work in a composition environment through reading, writing, and researching. Through group work, Kutz and Roskelly suggest that students might better cope with their “interpretations of difficult stories” (Kutz and Roskelly 262). They also suggest that group work is most useful during the revisionary stage of the writing process, the stage of many student writings that enter the UWC. The capability of students and consultants to work with others, despite clear differences, prepares them to work in other group situations. Ede and Lunsford’s “Why Write…Together” focuses on the ability for different people to collaborate on a piece of writing and produce quality results. UWC consultants are all unique in their interests and hobbies; thus, they are each able to bring a fresh perspective or voice to a student’s essay. In this fashion, consultant-consultant collaboration represents a unique approach to UWC consulting.

To enter topics of group dynamics into the workshop discussion, Kyle and Jon discussed several texts exploring the groundwork of group discourse and decision-making. Bruce Tuckman’s “Developmental Sequence in Small Groups” is a landmark text for opening discussion on group dynamics. His four steps of group collaboration—Forming, Storming, Norming, and Performing—were discussed and applied to collaborative writing center work. Additionally, John Smith’s *Collective Intelligence in Computer-based Collaboration* was used to extrapolate ideas approaching group collaborations as a data processing activity. The theories of collective intelligence and intelligence amplification were discussed and applied to writing center situations. The presentation concluded with an attendee response session comparing findings from both exercises. Much like consultant-consultant collaboration provides multiple perspectives on a piece of writing, Kyle and Jon hoped to gain diverse feedback on their presentation by initiating discourse between themselves and attendees from other writing centers. Discussion during the session was lively, informative, and engaging. Throughout the workshop, attendees enjoyed themselves while delving into issues of collaboration and group dynamics.

Jon Burr is a consultant for the University Writing Center. He is a Masters candidate in English Literature with a concentration in Composition and Rhetoric.
From the outside, the writing center and the writing classroom appear to be two completely different entities. One permits the writing process to happen in a logical, orderly fashion, while the other sees students perplexed about where they are in relation to the process. When students walk through the doors of a writing classroom, they (typically, fingers crossed) know where they are within their paper, where they are headed, and where, ultimately, they will end up. Contrast that with a college writing center where students often don’t even know the assignment, much less where they are headed. If you look at these two places, the writing classroom and the writing center, from a different angle, it’s almost like one environment preaches structure, while the other seems to foster chaos. However, I find the longer I’ve been at the helm of both of these environments, the more alike they become. In the classroom, for example, the idea that “writing is a process, not a product” has become my mantra of sorts, guiding my way, as well as my students, in using the idea of a process to allow them to evolve in their writing. What is this process we teach? Well, as Donald Murray so eloquently states, “it is the process of discovery through language.” By using language, we have the ability to explore what we know and how we feel about what we know. Using our immediate arsenal of language, or our voice, we come to understand that the writing process is the way to navigate our path through the always complex journey of writing. Through the preordained steps of pre-writing, writing, and re-writing, we eventually make our way to an essay’s conclusion.

The tutoring process relies on many of the same tactics as writing. Yet we are often so apt to put these practices into their own categories, that tutoring somehow remains distant from writing. Many times tutoring, from the outside of course, looks like an all or nothing type of situation. You either tutor during the invention stage, when individuals need someone to bounce ideas off of, or at the end of the process, when all they really want is an editor, or dare I say, just someone to check their grammar. However, I believe the writing center and the writing classroom are truly more alike than at first glance. If we had the ability to see the writing center, more so, tutoring, and the writing process together, I believe we would find that the community building that occurs in the writing classroom and our ability to foster writing independence would become easily recognizable in the writing center and the guidelines we set forth for our tutors. What results is that both writers and students who use the writing center would, naturally, “find themselves” not only in the process, but by going through the process.

The idea of “process,” can be seen simply as forward movement; taking something from beginning to end. Once we have gone through any process, and we follow the necessary steps that bring us to our eventual conclusion, we realize that those steps are crucial to arriving at our end. Both the act of writing and tutoring can be simply narrowed down to a process. Whether it is an actual paper, moving from brainstorming to proofreading, or a student beginning a tutoring session, or better yet, returning to a tutoring session and repeating the process, we willingly take steps to help ourselves move successfully from stage to stage. We use these steps, either in the writing process, or the tutoring process, as our compass to bring us from point A to point B—either completion of an essay, or completion of a tutoring session.

Looking at the writing classroom seems a good place to start exploring this process. In my Expository

“By using language, we have the ability to explore what we know and how we feel about what we know.”
Writing classroom, I incorporate several “workshop” days into our semester, so that we are able to look at drafts, no matter what “stage” the essay may be. One of the best parts about “workshopping” with others and sharing our drafts with others is the helpful feedback that comes as a part of the sharing process.

Typically, reading other people’s work allows us to become better writers; it allows us to recognize and notice elements and intricacies of others’ work, regardless of whether the writing is strong or not. I suppose my point is this: reading other students’ work makes us better writers. This goes for not only the writing classroom, but in the writing center as well. And while tutors are chosen because they have already been deemed good and/or strong writers, being on the other side of constructive criticism is quite a unique situation for them. No longer are the tutors on the receiving end of the feedback—now they are the ones providing it to their peers. For both environments, it does not matter what stage of the process a writer may be in—feedback is especially helpful to allow the writer to successfully reach the next level of the writing process.

As mentioned previously, most of the groundwork for my class syllabi can be traced back to Donald Murray. I am fascinated by the philosophy of Expressivism, a type of writing instruction popular in the 1970’s to the mid-1980’s propelled by such writers as Murray, Peter Elbow and Ken Macrorie. Through this model, writing is viewed as a means of self-discovery, with more attention to the writer than the text. With self-discovery in mind, it is easy to understand why I feel that writing is a means, or rather, an attempt to excavate what we already know. As confusing as it might seem, writing, and the so-called “story” we tell, is really us finding our way to the knowledge we already have—we just didn’t know we had it. In essence, it’s as if writing is the tool—the actual shovel—that allows us to dig deep to better understand what we already know. Writing brings our thoughts, values, ideas, feelings, opinions, whatever, to the surface and permits us to find who we are. And ultimately allows us, no, begs us to discover ourselves, our writing voice, through the process. Once we have discovered ourselves, we are permitted to, finally, express ourselves.

Similarly, tutors, much like the writing process, have the ability to unearth a writer’s potential. As written in the St. Martin’s Sourcebook for Writing Tutors, “An expressivist tutor explores the student’s understanding of the writing process, particularly the stages of invention and drafting, in which the writer generates ideas and seeks an authentic voice” (3). Meaning, the tutor acts as, or is the writing process for students. The tutor, in my mind, becomes the writing process, giving student writers, namely, their peers, the ability to uncover what they are trying to say—in essence, what they didn’t know they wanted to say until they met and worked with a tutor. And while this line of thinking may seem a bit unorthodox, looking at tutoring through a different lens allows us to draw parallels to see where writing theory and tutoring practice intersect.

When building and assessing the curriculum for the numerous Expository Writing classes that I teach, it is necessary to address the college community with several different elements. Among these are a definitive purpose of how best to serve the college community, a philosophy that coincides with the college’s mission, and most importantly, a desire to be a “sensitive” reader when reading student work. Not much different than that is the tutoring process, and how we train our tutors. Being a “sensitive” reader is what tutoring concerns itself with, as student writers of all levels, and all abilities, make their way through our writing center doors. And yet, we are able to address all areas of need—much like in the classroom. To that end, the classroom and the writing center continually strive to make students feel welcome. Upon the suggestion of a tutor at our particular institute, we’ve put pictures of the writing center tutors on a bulletin board so that when

“Writing brings our thoughts, values, feelings, opinions, whatever, to the surface and permits us to find who we are.”
The Writing Center and The Writing Process...continued from page 5

a student walks into the tutoring center, even if they’ve never been there before, they can at least identify who the writing tutor is.

It’s much like an icebreaker in the classroom. In both arenas, even if we don’t know who the students are that we are teaching or tutoring, we at least want to make them comfortable from the outset. I’m so passionately attached to this idea of making students feel comfortable that I’ve included it as part of my syllabi for Expository Writing, and it has become an integral component of my teaching philosophy.

In the classroom, I strive to foster learning in a comfortable environment—to build community. In relation to the process, I believe the idea of community allows students to move more fluidly through each stage, knowing that they are surrounded by people who support and encourage their progress. Once the student feels as if they are in a safe space, among a classroom “community” of like-minded individuals, then the learning can begin. Again, it is the same within the realm of tutoring. Once a student feels comfortable with the tutor, and has established a connection with her, an effective consultation can take place. A highly effective tutoring session can propel the student to walk away having learned not only about their essay, but, perhaps, about themselves. The same can be said about the writing classroom. Both the writing process and a tutoring session have the ability to transfer the power to the student, to make them an independent learner. When we ask our students questions to help them figure out a paper topic, or when we train tutors to have the pen/pencil remain in the students’ hands, we are sharing the same ideals in both environments.

Using the writing and/or tutoring processes, we finally arrive at a common goal—fostering independent learning, and giving our students, in the classroom, or in the writing center, the joy of figuring “it” out on their own, whatever “it” may be. By looking at the process, and seeing the writing center and the writing classroom as parts of a unique whole, we find that the steps result in bringing our students closer to their truth. Ultimately, our students will take from their sessions in either the writing center or the classroom the idea that going through a process will result in progress. Perhaps, the greatest progress will result in terms of finding themselves. Truly, it seems as though the essays students bring to either of these two locations on campus is a metaphor for finding the most essential element of the process—who they are.

Natalie Serianni is Director of the Lees-McRae College Writing Center and Coordinator of the Developmental Writing Program.

The Dotted Eye Grammar: 1) The relationships among words in a sentence; 2) The rules for correctly manipulating these relationships as set forth by established usage

Five common grammatical issues seen in the UWC:

- Commas with introductory elements
  
  When I saw him, I fainted.

- Commas with FANBOYS (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) to connect two or more complete sentences
  
  He had to wash the dishes, and he had to sweep the floor, but he did not have to clean the toilets.

- Parallelism in lists, i.e. keeping all items in the same format
  
  Even though he’d cut his hair, bought a dress suit, and washed his face, I still knew him. (all verb phrases)

- Comma splices, sentence fragments, and run-on sentences
  
  My summer vacation was great, I enjoyed it very much. When I was a kid. I liked trees they were fun to climb.

- Subject-verb disagreement
  
  Not one of your dogs are worth the price. (is)

Compliments of the UWC’s Recovering Prescriptivist, Allison Rose

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The Round Table

How do you accommodate difference in the University Writing Center?

I accommodate difference by making new knowledge! I'll ask questions and use the session for educational purposes—whether it's confronting mistakes with grammar or encouraging students to free-write on a personal experience.

- Beth Peddle, Consultant

“By accommodating difference in needs, we are helping to accomplish this goal as quickly as possible.”
- Kyle

“...accommodating and promoting difference in a staff begins to create a comfortable and accommodating setting for clients of all backgrounds and experiences.”
- Emily

“We have the staff this year to refer these clients, when necessary, to consultants who are particularly familiar with these specialized needs. It is important for us, as consultants, to continue to send the message that clients can bring almost any type of writing at any point in the writing process into the UWC.”
- Kyle Warner, Consultant

“This semester our staff is more diverse than any other year I've worked in here. . . in terms of male/female ratio, age variation, and overall differences in where people are at in their lives and education paths.”
- Emily Lindner, Assistant Director

“Accommodating difference has certainly been an important theme for the Writing Center this year.”
- Kyle

“. . . one of our focuses this year [is] to improve our awareness of our disabled clients and their needs.”
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“However, accommodation also includes specific assignments clients bring to the Writing Center.”
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“It is hard [. . .] to think about what we do without thinking about how our efforts prioritize difference above many other competing forces—uniformity, consistency, apathy, etc.”
- Emily

“How do you accommodate difference in the University Writing Center?”

The Round Table

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The Round Table

How do you accommodate difference in the University Writing Center?
Not only has the University Writing Center’s physical location changed, but our clientele is changing as well. In particular, the Center has received more and more visitors who need assistance with the PRAXIS I writing examination. The PRAXIS I writing subtest is divided into two sections. The first part has multiple choice questions pertaining to word usage and sentence errors. After the multiple choice portion of the writing test, test takers have thirty minutes to write an essay on an assigned topic. They must be able to invent and organize ideas, write out the essay, and proofread/edit in no more than thirty minutes. This is a challenge for the most experienced writer.

Those familiar with the PRAXIS and other Educational Testing Service productions (GRE and SAT for example) know they carry high stakes. The PRAXIS determines whether a student may enter a teacher education program; equally important, it contributes to whether a K-12 teacher is classified as “highly certified” under the No Child Left Behind policy. To obtain teacher licensure in North Carolina, Education majors must take two different tests in the PRAXIS Series. These tests are as follows:

(1) PRAXIS I Test (a computerized test that consists of three sections: Mathematics, Reading, and Writing).
(2) PRAXIS II (Subject Specialty Area test).

Students are denied entrance into the School of Education and cannot even enroll in required education courses until they pass all three subject sections of the PRAXIS I. Complicating the matter, each state establishes a qualifying score for each of the three sections. In North Carolina, students must score a minimum of 173 in Writing, 173 in Mathematics, and 176 in Reading. Individuals who score below the minimum cut off fail that subject area; some test takers may pass the Reading and Mathematics sections but fail the Writing section. In such cases, the student must only re-take the Writing section. There are also financial incentives for passing the test. Test re-takers must pay $75.00 per subject area each time they re-take the test, which can become pretty costly, especially if they are re-taking multiple sections.

Over the past two semesters, the UWC has conducted over one hundred PRAXIS sessions. In at least five cases, individuals scheduled weekly appointments at least two months prior to their test date. All individuals who came to the Writing Center for PRAXIS I assistance classified themselves as “re-taking” the exam—meaning each of them scored below the North Carolina minimum requirement for the Writing section. In all but one case, students came to the UWC for specific help with the Writing and Usage section of the Praxis; however, we did have one student who came for help with the Reading section. Although we will not turn anyone away, we do recommend that re-takers of the Reading section first contact Cama Duke, a Reading specialist in The Learning Assistance Program.

In the UWC, we work one-on-one for hour long sessions to help familiarize students with the rhetorical context of the PRAXIS I. When a student comes for help with the PRAXIS, we hold an informal introductory consultation, in which we assess the student’s individual situation. We begin with a basic conversation to learn more about why the student seeks services from the UWC. In most cases, students come to the Center with the goal of “passing the exam;” however, students have stated other goals such as “becoming a stronger writer.” For every student, the pedagogical approach slightly shifts, but we have learned that some methods must remain constant. The following list indicates some consistent writer needs:

- help you assess your strengths and weaknesses as a writer
- give you a chance to take practice tests: both essay and usage sections
- model the test environment: adhere to time constraints and formal academic language.
- compare what you write in consultations to the actual scoring rubric used by the PRAXIS raters
- discuss the Praxis audience: to whom are you writing?

Continued on page 9
For optimal results, we do recommend that test takers spend at least three months preparing for the exam. If you are re-taking the exam, we suggest setting up consistent weekly appointments with the same UWC consultant. In order to improve your writing for the PRAXIS, you must write under the PRAXIS guidelines; therefore, be prepared to write sample PRAXIS essays in your consultations. We will help you address each step of the writing process (invention, drafting, and editing) as well as assist you with frequent sentence level issues that come up in the usage section. We will use your own writing to determine your strengths and weaknesses, and we will use your writing to locate grammatical patterns. In many cases, after a few weeks of working one-on-one, individuals begin to identify their own mistakes.

The UWC offers Praxis I Writing consultations because we believe that through practice writers can develop their skills and gain authority in many writing situations, including standardized tests. Staff members work one-on-one with students and prepare individual tutorial plans. We approach the essay exam as a rhetorical situation, in which a writer must address a subject to a specified audience. In this case, the stakes are much higher since the writing context is a test. Through regular consultations, writing center consultants familiarize students to this specific form of writing and test taking. While passing the exam remains a primary objective, we also hope to teach lifelong literacy skills that will enhance writer authority in both academic and professional writing situations.

Bre Garrett is a part-time instructor in the Department of English at Appalachian State University. In the fall she will attend Miami University of Ohio, where she will pursue a PhD in Composition and Rhetoric.

“Come on in, the writing’s fine!” - caption by Jon Burr
Lisa Baldwin’s fifth grade class from Cove Creek Elementary School toured the University Writing Center with Director Beth Carroll this semester. Here are some of their thank you letters.

Thank you for the tour. My favorite part was the Behind the scenes. The staff area was put together nicely.

Sincerely, Jordan

Thank you for letting us come look at the Writing Center. I think it is nice that you help people with their writing when they need it. I think you are a great writer because you take the time to help other people.

Your Friend, Lindsay

I you were a good writer guide! You helped everybody learn the real heart of writing! I don’t think you’re a geek at all. Because if you’re a geek then I must be one too! I have always loved writing and reading! I read a book that had five hundred twenty-five pages! I wrote a freewrite about me and a dragon and I got a check on it! I think your awesome! Oh man! I have to go! Bye!

Your dragon writer, Ashtyn

Thank you for letting the classes and me see the writing room. It is small but I bet a lot of people come. Do you like your job?

from alex

I do not think you are a geek but you are just good at writing and it is your specialty. I think you are so nice that you let the students come in and you help them with their writing problems. I have a question When students and other people come in do they usually have problems or is it because they want to get away from the noise?

Your friend, Sawyer

Thank you for showing us The Writing Center. Thought that if was pretty cool Thank you.

Sincerely, Timmy

I really liked the writing center because you can go in there and write in total silence! If you didn’t understand some thing you could get help. When you are in there can you edit your papers? Can you draw pictures to go with your papers? How old do you have to be to go to the writing center?

Love, Jesse
Thank you for telling us you was a geek. You are a good teacher. If I come to that school I will come to you.
   Your friend, Josh

Thank you for letting our classes come and look around. I liked the sunroof a whole lot. I thought it was a nice place.
   Your friend, Jacob

I don't have much to say, but I will say all I can. The writing site was cool and roomy. It was interesting. I loved how it was Glass. The Best Thing is meeting you there.
   Sincerely, Loren

Thank you very much for showing us the writing center. It's a very nice thing to do that for other people. The area is nice and just the right size for it. In our school, we have an "Authors Night." "Authors Night" is when everybody writes a story and the classes vote and choose two people from each class, and then have a night when we all read our stories. Once again thank you so much.
   Sincerely, Anastasia

My uncle Houston is the head coach at Appalachian in Basketball. Do you think if I asked him if I could get an ID card to check out stuff? Thanks for your time for us to experience the writing center.
   Your tourist, Morgan
   P.S. What’s your favorite part of the library

...She opened the door from the steps into the living room, and it slowly shut behind her, trapping me alone in the dark with the granddaddy long legs that continuously climbed around the rough walls no matter what the season. I could hear her above me running through the house trying to find mom. The shadows of the room leapt out at me, and I was suddenly frightened by everything I had felt comforting before: the movement of my dog in his cage, the water rushing through the pipes, the dust that floated in the air and made me sneeze. I didn’t move a muscle. I sat in the car that I thought was indestructible, holding my hand beneath my chin, collecting the blood as it dripped into my palm...

- Excerpt from “Sunday Stitches”
Dana Grimstead, Sophomore English major

- Excerpt from “To Dear Love”
Matthew Haney, Sophomore English major

Student Submissions

Again I tried to speak,
The words I wanted to say
But this time a lady came forth,
And led him down a path astray.
She led and lighted the way,
With a lantern of knowledge so bright...

- Excerpt from “To Dear Love”
Matthew Haney, Sophomore English major
A Point of Grammar

Back in my own college days, I knew there was at least one certain error – the split infinitive – that would prompt my freshman English instructor to mark my sentences with fiery red circles.

Today’s undergraduate student faces a more stubborn grammatical problem – the agreement dilemma that forces the student to use the awkward “his or her.” For example, consider this sentence: “It is evident that the amount of time a child spends with their peers influences their academic performance.” The error lies in the lack of agreement between child and their. Child is the singular antecedent; therefore, their, which refers to child, should be singular, not plural. Unfortunately, the corrected sentence is cumbersome: “It is evident that the amount of time a child spends with his or her peers influences his or her academic performance.” Most writing professionals would encourage the writer to correct the error by changing all forms to the plural: “It is evident that the amount of time children spend with their peers influences their academic performance.” In most cases, this adjustment to the plural satisfies the requirements of syntax and smoothness of expression.

Still, there are instances when the singular form brings greater power to the sentence than the plural form. For example, suppose a student includes this sentence in an essay: “A parent’s heart is with their child.” A writing professional may suggest changing all forms to the plural (“Parents’ hearts are with their children”), but this suggestion is not completely satisfactory. The plural cannot maintain the same power as the singular in this particular sentence. Another suggested revision might be “A mother’s heart is with her child,” or “A father’s heart is with his child,” but this revision changes the meaning of the original by forcing the writer to choose a gender to represent the statement. The writer may hope to convey the universal sentiment of parenthood, not link the thought to motherhood or fatherhood per se. The writing professional could also offer “A parent’s heart is with his or her child,” but this sentence brings an awkwardness to the thought that may cause the writer to consider abandoning the sentiment altogether.

The difficulty, of course, does not lie with the writer, but with the language itself. English, with its abundance of words and richness of meaning, fails in this one respect – there is no universally accepted gender-neutral singular pronoun. Their, however illogical, will probably win the battle for recognition in the end. Until that time, the tedious chore of suggesting revisions to avoid this dilemma will keep my own red pen busy, though it is running low on ink.

Thankfully, our language is not static. This situation will in time resolve itself. English-speakers and style manuals alike will eventually acknowledge an acceptable gender-neutral singular pronoun. Their, however illogical, will probably win the battle for recognition in the end. Until that time, the tedious chore of suggesting revisions to avoid this dilemma will keep my own red pen busy, though it is running low on ink.

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