Inventing the Writing Center
Beth Carroll - Writing Center Director

Lately, I’ve had assessment on my mind. The University Writing Center just finished its first three-year cycle of program assessment and strategic planning. Through this process I have discovered that creating assessment documents involves a kind of simultaneous forward-looking/backward-looking perspective on the Writing Center’s history and future.

Writing about assessment means not only inventing particular documents, but it also means inventing and re-inventing the idea of the Writing Center itself. Assessment isn’t generally a topic that generates much excitement; however, I’ve been surprised to discover the exciting opportunities for imagining our future.

In the Writing Center of the future, I see us expanding our work of assisting writers using the most effective and accessible means available. This work requires us to reinvent the Writing Center with every writer who walks through our door because each writing conference is new and different each time.

All of us—those who work here and those who visit us as clients—collaboratively invent the Writing Center every moment we’re here. Our work is generative: it requires invention at every stage of the writing and tutoring processes, and that’s what makes our work dynamic and exciting. As we assess and re-assess the Writing Center, I’d like to find more ways to highlight the opportunities and excitement that writing and writers bring to us.

A recent post to wcenter (the listserv for writing center folk) ended with this statement about the creative endeavors and invention involved in writing center work: “We’re not here because students can’t write; we’re here because they do.” I think we should adopt that as our motto and include it on the new strategic plan.

A Writer’s Blessing
May your thoughts be always ready.
May your hands conduct them quickly to the page.
May your Muse visit freely and often.
And may the blank page fill with words
As you continue with your work.

-Emily Johnson
Writing Center Consultant

“No writer is an island unto himself.”
Ian Burkett - Writing Center Consultant
David Sword died three years ago. We both went to the same elementary school and high school, and we both had blonde hair. Later, we were Facebook Friends, but that’s about as far as it goes. Still, there was great power in his death.

I never was really good friends with him, but something stirred in me, aching to make meaning out of his untimely death. To be honest, I forgot about it until a month ago, but Facebook has an unfortunate way of reminding one of acquaintances that have long been forgotten.

On the right side of my screen, a little picture of David popped up with the words “Reconnect with him” written underneath. Obviously, writing on his wall would do neither of us much good, but I allowed that suggestion steep in my head for a little while. Like a good cup of Earl Grey, I let it brew for longer than usual. Finally I realized what I should do with it.

Write.

I have always loved writing, and I recently discovered a liking for poetry. While I have never been one for form, narrative poetry has been one of my truest outlets of expression recently. Dr. Mark Vogel is partly responsible for this as it is his primary mode of literary expression as well.

Although the classes that he teaches have nothing to do with poetry, he sometimes shares his own bizarre writings with us during the beginning of class. Poems about squished frogs in his driveway or middle school experiences are the topics of the odd pieces he shares on these occasions. But, as strange as they are, they are probably the most honest pieces of literature I have ever encountered. The writing is simple, and the wording is plain, but I have never had this kind of connection to poetry before Dr. Vogel’s class.

I decided to appropriate this venue of honest narrative poetry for myself. I sat in one of the comfy chairs in the library and fleshed out something that resembled how I felt about David Sword’s death.

After stewing on the unfortunate passing, the included poem is what evolved. In a sense, this is my way of putting flowers by his grave. I’ll never get another chance to say anything to him, so I hope this works.

A Eulogy (Three Years Too Late)

You were my rival in fifth grade.
I don’t think you knew that, probably because you were too cool to be around me. But, I subtly competed with you then.

I forgot about you until high school, junior year.
You sat diagonally in front of me in Mr. Atkin’s Chemistry Lab, and you were kind of an asshole.

Not to me, no, but, well, you just were.
In some way, I won because I wasn’t an asshole.
But you had a girlfriend.

We’ll call it even.

You died three years ago.
I didn’t have a whole lot to say other than some of those chemicals we played with in chemistry were found inside of your body.

But, I write to you now in a gentlemanly laying down of arms. -Kyle Blochl

I hear the innards of this machine cranking and pulling under the weight
groaning with the strain
and this is me, I think.

The damp air impregnated with rain,
clings to my skin and forms rivets
I watch with mild curiosity.

for in the end it really does not matter.
They will clutch desperately to the folds of this paper thin skin
till they drop in exhaustion to the ground.

-Lindsey Shapiro
Writing Center Desk Support

Inventing the wheel
Moved man to a new level.
Time to reinvent.

-Tara Moore
Writing Center Consultant

Can’t think. What to write?
Type..Erase..
Type..Erase..#$%!.
Brainstorming
no bueno.

-Sarah Horne
Writing Center Consultant
The Invention of Jerry, the Erroneous Gopher

Catherine Talley - Writing Center Consultant, Faculty Member, Co-Editor of the Revisioner

It all began with a simple aside in the Writing Center. I sat in the UWC office, chatting with my boss and my boss’s boss. In the midst of the chatter, one of these two culprits revealed the Wired Scholar’s secret word of the day. This is a custom that has existed for some time. Each day the Wired Scholar has a secret word. That secret word is circulated between a limited number of staff and faculty members – friends of the coffee shop. Once the secret word is known, an individual can mutter that word at the coffee counter and receive a free refill. On this day the secret word was “erroneous”. I had never heard of this method for coffee procurement, and I was intrigued. Innocently, I inquired as to yesterday’s secret word, and my boss’s boss told me that yesterday the word was “gopher”. The three of us paused, wondering if there was any rhyme or reason to these two words or if the two words were random. As we floated inside this silly moment, I muttered, “Erroneous Gopher. That would make a great title.” And Jerry the culinary Gopher was born.

We have all heard the phrase “necessity is the mother of invention.” And in this case, that dialectic plays true. I, as the co-editor of the Revisioner, have the pressure of composing an original piece of writing for this semester’s publication. As and limitless and non-threatening as the theme of “Invention” appears, I have harbored laboriously under the pressure to invent, constantly hearing the tick-tock-tick of the deadline approaching. I could not think of a topic. I could not frame a purpose. I was struggling for something to say. But then, in a conversation as insignificant as this, invention showed itself to me (in the form of a culinary-inclined gopher named Jerry – the gopher that had no purpose within his clan – the erroneous gopher).

To me this is the very nature of invention. It is the art of allowing one’s self to listen. Listen to all the words you hear. Listen to all the silly conversations you have. Listen. That is the first step towards invention. But there is a second step, and this step takes a bit of blind courage. To collate an inventive idea, one must grant herself a leap of faith. In my case with Jerry the Gopher, I had to latch onto an idea that was merely the ramblings of a silly water cooler conversation. Furthermore, I had to take that silly idea and cultivate it into an idea that reflected the ridiculousness of the original conversation. The lesson here is about trust. Trust those zany ideas. Trust those (pardon) erroneous asides. As a writer, allow yourself the ability to see the nonchalant and irrelevant as possible source material. If a writer can blindly allow such absorption, invention will eventually find the writer, for better or for worse. Perhaps Jerry is the worst, but even if he fails to live beyond my initial written introduction to him, he has still served as a catalyst for invention. He has still managed to get me to write something. And to inspire a writer to create those first, intimidating and elusive words is, in and of itself, an accomplishment for both experienced writers and novice writers. With my preface in place and my explanation proposed, I give you Jerry, The Erroneous Gopher.

Jerry, The Erroneous Gopher (Chapter 1)

Jerry Gopher was a member of a highly energized, ambitious family of gophers who prided themselves on productivity and quality of product. Jerry’s brother, Steve, was actually the recipient of the Gortary Club’s annual wood-sculpture competition three years running, and Steve’s trophies hung over the naturalized Maple mantel, accumulating regularly.

Craftsmanship was the center of Jerry’s family coat-of-arms, predictably, and every Gopher, Jerry or otherwise, was indoctrinated in the culture of wood manipulation. This is understandable. The species that is credited with supplying the building supplies to Noah as he constructed his Ark is bound to harbor pressure to continue their work in wood construction, manipulation and sculpture.

But Jerry cared not for wood. Jerry wanted to be a baker. For as long as Jerry could remember, he had been drawn to the art of cooking. He longed for complex flavor profiles, intensified spicing and the confused elation that comes with combining salty and sweet. As an adolescent gopher, he could often be found where the meadow meets the cement— the enclosed picnic area where overstuffed bi-peds would throw away their afternoon picnic goodies on the way back to their Subaru Outbacks. Acting on a bizarre internal instinct, Jerry would camp by the trash bins, collecting bits of food. With the remnants of potato salads, crumbs from bags of Chex mix and residue from the bottom of juice boxes, he would experiment with recipes.

Sadly, what some would consider an extraordinary talent for a gopher, others found not only odd, but offensive to the gopher community. Jerry’s desire to bake was at direct odds with his family’s trade. To be a baker Jerry would have to burn the wood that generations of gophers had spent ages crafting. This impasse marginalized Jerry from the other gophers, and he spent much of his time in solitude, his efforts seen as erroneous and antithetical to the goals of his community. It was clear to all that Jerry was on a path leading towards exile.
Character Invention
By Nikki Roberti -
Writing Center Consultant and co-editor of the Revisor

I have resolved that in order to invent realistic characters who speak in realistic ways, one must be borderline schizophrenic and/or the noisiest person in the world.

“Your characters are so real!” a woman said to me after some of my short plays were performed at the Kennedy Center a couple years ago. “How do you come up with your scripts?”

The question caught me off guard, particularly because it was an odd question to ask while in line for the ladies room, but also because no one had ever asked me about my process.

“Well,” I said hesitantly. “I just write a name, and have the name say something.”

Blank stares. I tried to explain further.

“Eventually it turns into a conversation and a conversation turns into a story and a story turns into a person.”

That was sufficient enough for her at this point, and with a warm smile she said, “That’s amazing!” I’m sure she thought I was crazy.

The truth is, when I write my plays, I start with the most random conversation in the world. I’ll play back conversations in my head that I’ve had with other people that day, trying to see where it could have gone or what I could have said differently. Yes, this means I sometimes talk to myself.

Sometimes the conversations from my own daily life are not sufficient inspiration, so I resort to keeping my ears open while on the bus, at the store, and anywhere that there are people. I guess you could call this eavesdropping, but I had a playwriting professor give an assignment based on this concept once. He argued that this was a very important tactic in dialogue writing. Some of my best characters have come from awkward situations I’ve witnessed in real life.

Am I crazy? Maybe. But how can anyone expect to write realistic dialogue if they haven’t heard it out loud themselves? I’m so tired of reading books with lengthy statements by some guy who, if he ever spoke to me in real life, would probably make me fall asleep. People don’t talk in huge, eloquent blocks. Sometimes they create their own grammar or their own words. Sometimes others cut them off.

People talk like people talk. So we should write in the same way when creating characters—not write how people write.

So talk to yourself, say your dialogue out loud and eavesdrop on crazy people at the store. You may get strange looks, but you’ll have invented the most realistic characters on the block.

The Writing Basket
By Rachel Strickland - Writing Center Assistant Director

Though I never knew where the custom was invented, when some of the graduate students I oversaw at a former institution began the process of drafting their thesis or dissertation, a student who had already “come through” the process usually gifted them with a “writing basket”. Since first coming upon this graduate school tradition, I’ve come to see the importance and wisdom in such a gift, and I’ve often observed that those students who actually received the gift (yes, some were not so lucky) survived the arduous task of finishing their mammoth writing piece with a much more sane and calm demeanor.

The contents of these writing baskets would vary depending on the recipient and the giver, but some items would inevitably remain the same since the students found particular pieces essential to the writing process. Since these items were necessary for the thesis and dissertation writing process, I believe that they could also be useful to any writing process. So I gift you, dear reader, with the text version of your very own writing basket.

Socks—Socks, you say? Not just any socks, I say. These need to be fuzzy socks, preferably with the rubbery grippers on the bottom and in some pattern you would never normally wear so as not to mistakenly use them for everyday accompaniment with shoes. Not only have I been told the socks will provide a level of comfort that is unmatched by your regular old argyle, but they will also put you in the very mood to stay by your word processor, hunker down, and write. Besides, who likes frosty tootsies?

Chocolate—Whether you prefer dark Dove or Reese’s Cups, your basket will include something that is individually wrapped and small. This is not the time to break out the tub of icing, though that may be your vice. When writing, you really just need something to melt in your mouth and quench a craving while you move on to your next paragraph, and you need lots of the somethings, so stick to the bags of multiples for the most inspiration and satisfaction.

Classical music—Bruno Mars might be who you prefer to listen to on a regular basis, but listening to him or Blondie while you write will only get their tunes stuck in your head, and then you’ll start writing about hearts of glass and other things that don’t make sense. Good ‘ol Vivaldi will keep you awake and inspired without making your prose stray.

Magazine or short comic book—This may seem antithetical to staying on track, or getting on the track, to writing, but finding inspiration in someone else’s writing is priceless, and magazines and comic books are short enough that you don’t have to devote a lot of attention to them or read them through in one sitting. You can find inspiration in how the comic book characters have been invented or in how the magazine article authors approach different topics. Both mediums are rich fodder for revelations, and they can jog you out of any writing rut.

Enjoy the contents of your basket, and use them wisely. You have no idea where your writing will take you.
The dirt road narrowed to a one-lane bridge. I gingerly maneuvered the car to align the wheels with the two wooden planks, the only means of traversing the small, bubbling creek. I am lost, I am really lost, I thought. Despite my desire to turn around, a deeper impulse cajoled me to keep following the road. This thought was totally irrational, this need to keep going, especially given that I had been driving an hour without a clue where I was. Nevertheless, a nugget of hope carried me forward, the hope that I would find the tombstone of John Ross, a famous Indian chief who was a key player in the Cherokee’s tragic migration west known as the Trail of Tears.

This was my high school senior project. Drive the Trail of Tears from South Carolina to its final destination in Tahlequah, Oklahoma. I had latched onto this random event in history for some unknown reason, finding it both intriguing and simultaneously horrifying.

When I initially presented the idea to my parents and teachers, they found it absurd. My dad only shook his head: “You want to drive to Oklahoma?” After a lot of convincing in the form of how this trip could change my perspective on life, my father acquiesced: “If you fund everything, you can go.” Somehow, I scraped up some money from an array of sympathetic donors. I then mapped out a loose path with key stops along the way. I just wanted to drive west. No real plan, no outline—just drive. In all honesty, the endgame, a full-length research paper, had, at this point, completely eluded me. So during the drive I just took in the scenery and hoped an insight would pop into my head.

Up to the point of arriving in Oklahoma, my trip had been interesting—but only interesting. I had stopped at key locations, markers in the road, plaques in parks that read, “A HISTORICAL SITE,” and inconspicuous museums that housed notable memorabilia from the early 19th century. But beyond that, none of it had been cathartic. I had read on a random website that a graveyard existed, containing many key victims from the Trail of Tears, and I figured this might yield some interesting material. As one unsure turn led to another though, my confidence of the graveyard’s existence grew shakier, especially when I encountered the bridge. This is it? I either stop here, or I don’t. There was a decision to be made: how important was this research ‘adventure’ to me? Does deciding whether or not to cross this bridge have more to do with my desire for adventure or the need to garner research to complete my paper? Both perhaps?

I inched the car forward, and the windows ratted as the tires rolled onto the planks. I looked outside only to see a twenty-foot drop and the creek below. My heart raced. What am I thinking? I slowly took my foot off the brake, and the car gently rolled forward. Moving the car at minute intervals, my tires finally hit the dirt on the other side, and I had successfully crossed the creek.

Conquering the bridge instilled me with a new-

The UWC Word Search

D I N V E R T O N N I Y
G I O G A C I H C D M R N
N O I T A T N E M U C O D
L T T I A E W E D L I I I
A I A D E O M R I S O E E
C R T A N V A E I D O M E
J E L A E F N V M T U R I
D R U S T T E R O S I A S
A A S I P R O C E S S N D
R A N V L N D R T A S G G
Y G O G A D E P C N D N G
I N C E D T A E T N E W
R I O S L A T T I I N R

pedagogy consultation writing
essay resume documentation
chicago invention revision
drafting process radical
client reader audience
found confidence and motivation. I was ready to be more proactive and open to what would come next.

The road finally dead-ended at a house where a man stood outside working on a car. He stared at me curiously as I pulled the car up next to him: “Do you know where the John Ross memorial graveyard is?”

“It’s closed to the public. But guess what? I have access because I am Cherokee. I can take you if you follow me behind my house.”

It was already beginning to get dark as he led me through the woods. He lit up a kerosene torch so we could navigate ourselves safely, and just as dark settled in, we came to a hill of tombstones, eroded and chipped from years of exposure to the elements. The graveyard baffled me, given that numerous “famous” people pertaining to the Trail of Tears were buried out there. The man, Jim, told me about how the graveyard was terribly mistreated and had no funding; he also said that I was one of the first people that he knew to actively investigate its existence.

For the next three hours Jim gave me a tour of the gravestones and told me many of his own stories. He spoke about how his ancestors had been wiped out as a result of the Trail of Tears, except for his great-great-great grandmother, who had somehow survived and made a life for herself in Oklahoma. His passion and personal connection with the graveyard inspired me, and I found myself eagerly inquiring further, to the point that I ended up finding what I was looking for: a paper topic.

This was where the road had led me - to a rural Oklahoma graveyard on a cool April night. In some ways, I could almost deem finding this graveyard as fate. And yet, my paper ended up veering towards the deteriorating conditions of Cherokee monuments, a radically different topic than I originally expected. It was my unwillingness to dwell upon the end result that led me to my discovery. My ideas arose from my tired feet, the palpable fear of the bridge, the frigidness of the Oklahoma wind, my deep need to learn more, and my ability to listen. It was the mobility that inspired me to express, to write.

Mobility Cont. from pg 5

Invention. What can be invented?

Light bulbs are invented. Peanut butter is invented. Even the stop light is invented. Words are not invented. Words are reinvented. We reinvent words every single day. One day the word “bad” can mean horrible, but the next day, the word “bad” can mean good. We are constantly reinventing the connotations of words, giving new meaning to old words and finding new ways to say common phrases.

Writing is not invention; it is reinvention. The classics have been written - The Shining, Pride and Prejudice, Frankenstein—how can we top those? Sometimes, we cannot. It is simply done. To rewrite Frankenstein would be a mistake. Would we reinvent peanut butter just because? No. Our job is to reinvent the words. Reinvent the meaning. Reinvent the perception.
Finding Spaces: Creativity in a Country Full of Neurotics

By Laura Tabor - Writing Center Consultant

I wanted to write a lot of different things for the Revisioner this year. I was, however, busy with three jobs and being a full-time senior in college. So my invention was cut short every time.

I don't claim exclusivity – if anything, everyone I know is too busy to be the creative people they have the potential to be. As a culture, we’ve paradoxically chosen working too much in order to achieve “the good life” only to then discover we have no time to enjoy it. This doesn't leave much time for culture, much less for creating new things.

In the spirit of finding space to create, I will offer these ideas. I have employed them all to greater or lesser success, but part of the creation process is that everyone has to approach it using their own individual process.

1. ART SUPPLIES – Get some paint, paper, crayons, what have you; put on a television show you like but don't want to pay much attention to, or some music, and mess with art. It doesn't matter whether you were that artsy kid who got roped into a business degree or if art class was filled with “That's very nice, honey” for you; embrace the democracy of art and have fun with it. If you don't like it, feel free to throw it away and chalk the session up to therapy. If you like it (and you probably will), put it up on your wall or refrigerator.

2. ISOLATION - I don't mean isolation from people. I mean isolation from distraction. This is a really great way to set the gears whirring. Turn off your internet router. Go for a hike in the woods. Try hanging out in the gym without an iPod. You'll start seeing and hearing things that you normally tune out, and it will make you think.

3. CARRY A NOTEBOOK OR CAMERA – Ever seen Harriet the Spy? She sees everything, and she writes everything down. Yes, she was a creepy little girl, and you are a successful go-getter, but there is a good point there – if you hear a snippet of dialogue that makes you smile, or if you think of an ingenious way to revolutionize your industry, or if you see the most perfect snapshot ever, you want to be able to come back to it. More than making us un inventive, being busy makes us forgetful. Using this technique, you create an auxiliary brain to reference when you finally find the time.

4. THE WRITING CENTER – However clichéd this seems, going to the University Writing Center is a great way to break out of the busyness funk. Make an appointment, and set that hour aside for nothing but brainstorming. Do you need to talk out an idea on keeping your senior capstone interesting? Do you want to write creatively but can't figure out what to write? Do you have an idea for a business but need someone to take notes while you talk it through out loud? Brainstorming is a great thing, but it’s even better with an impartial audience, and the University Writing Center is a great way to move from the thinking-about-it-on-the-way-to-class stage to the writing-about-it-and-moving-forward stage.

By Laura Tabor - Writing Center Consultant

Dan Kaple - Writing Center Artist, Model, Technical Guru
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Appalachian State University

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