

# Writing Matters

The Newsletter of the Lafayette College Writing Program

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## So Much to Read, So Little Time

You'll notice that this issue is wordier than earlier editions. There's a great deal more to read than usual. We're not trying to be loquacious, long-winded, or even verbose. It's just that a lot has been going on in the College Writing Program, and we want to share some of that with you. For example, two WAs, Heather Bastian and Lindsey Harkness, just had an article accepted for publication. We've included a segment of it here.

Also, it's WA hiring time. There are files to read, interviews to schedule, choices to make. We want to thank all of you who nominated students for the positions; your thoughts and comments help us out a great deal. We also want to remind you that WA evaluations are due at the end of the semester. And if you want to request a WA for next semester, see the notice below.

Finally, we thought it a good idea to share with you some of the thinking behind WA hiring and training methods. Patricia Donahue and Beth Seetch offer their perspectives on what we look for in WA candidates.

We hope you enjoy this issue, and we hope you contact us (any of us) with comments or questions. Have a good end of the semester and a wonderful summer.

--Bill Carpenter, Editor

### Important Dates

May 9: Last day of classes; WA requests due

May 12-19: Final exams

May 20: Senior grades due

May 24: Commencement



## Request a WA!

The deadline for CWP applications for fall 2003 is Friday, May 9. If you would like to request a WA for your course, please read over the list of requirements below for participation in CWP. Application forms are available on the CWP homepage: <http://www2.lafayette.edu/~writprog/cwp.htm>. (Click on "CWP Forms" and then "Request a WA.") CWP provides Writing Associates for all First-Year Seminars; if you are teaching one of these courses, *you need not submit an application*. If you have any questions, please contact Bianca Falbo (Assistant Director, CWP) by e-mail ([falbob](mailto:falbob)) or at X5243.

### Requirements for participation in CWP:

- You will schedule, at regular intervals across the semester, **four** required meetings between the Writing Associate and **every** student in the class.
- You will assign **approximately** 20 pages of written work, spaced at reasonable intervals (a term paper is appropriate if assigned, submitted, and revised in parts).
- You will meet with the Writing Associate assigned to your course to explain assignments, criteria for evaluation, grading policies, and disciplinary conventions.
- You will keep your Writing Associate apprised of changes in due dates, relevant course policy, writing expectations.
- You will revise or reword assignments to satisfy the goals of the program and to enable the Writing Associate to work effectively.
- You will evaluate and grade all written work yourself.

At the end of the semester, you and your students will complete written evaluations of your WA. (Forms will be mailed to you; FYI they are also available at <http://www2.lafayette.edu/~writprog/cwp.htm>.)



## Why Writing Matters

Writing Matters, the newsletter of the College Writing Program, is a bi-annual publication designed to inform the Lafayette community of the Program's activities and events. In addition, it offers a forum for discussing writing strategies, study habits, teaching practices, and composition scholarship. The name, of course, plays on the double meaning of the word "matters." On these pages, we will discuss the many issues—matters, if you will—related to learning and teaching writing. At the same time, we will discuss the importance of writing to the intellectual life of this campus, demonstrating that writing matters.

## CWP Staff

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# What It Takes to Be a WA

## By Beth Seetch

It may come as a surprise that the best academic writers and the highest achieving students do not necessarily make good Writing Associates. In fact, because the best WAs have both an appetite for intellectual work and an appreciation for the continuing struggle that characterizes the scholarly enterprise, their own academic records and academic writing sometimes show signs of that very struggle and the chaos that can result.

So what qualities do those of us in CWP look for when assembling the WA staff? Many of you, having contributed nominations and recommendations to support our efforts, already know that we collect a great deal of information about the applicants:

- We examine the candidates' writing samples;
- we give them a grammar quiz;
- we consider both their GPA and their record of specific courses;
- and, after all that, we subject them to thorough interviews wherein their abilities to grapple with complex assignments, interact with peers, and reflect on the process of writing are all on display.

Throughout the recruiting season, we try to identify qualities of mind and of character that manifest themselves both in applicants' files and in person. The first category, quality of mind, includes the ability to tolerate ambiguity, to reflect upon errors thoughtfully, and to consider a variety of approaches to writing, particularly approaches that may vary across disciplines. For instance, a student unacquainted with the use of subheadings to manage a long report might not perceive, at first, that his own reliance on subtle transitions within long paragraphs is another strategy for accomplishing the same result. Another student, having met with continued academic success by formulating a detailed thesis in the first paragraph of every composition, may need to be trained to look elsewhere in second paragraphs, in abstracts, or in *Results* and *Discussion* sections, depending on whose writing she is studying. If an applicant has learned that the use of the passive voice and the first person are always bad in academic writing, is he or she then ready to complicate that training? To see that writers have choices about these rules? In general, Writing Associates must present themselves as being *trainable*. If they comprehend the nature of evidence and rhetorical strategies in their own writing, can they then learn to transfer this comprehension to their reading of other students' writing?

Thus, we place far more value on this kind of thoughtful open-mindedness in our candidates than we do on any mastery of content from a specific course. This is especially true when assembling a staff who will work in FYS and VAST courses—courses with interdisciplinary concerns. The students enrolled in these courses and in many of the other courses served by WAs are frequently making their own transitions into new writing situations, grappling with the conventions and subject matter of academic disciplines new to them.

The Writing Associates who meet with these students must display both confidence and approachability. Therefore the list of qualities we seek in a WA's character begins with the ability to listen. A Writing Associate has got to be patient and thoughtful enough to hear what writers think of their own drafts. That same WA must be assertive enough to sit down with busy faculty and learn more about the goals of a particular writing assignment, both asking questions on behalf of the class and providing faculty with feedback about patterns displayed in students conferences. All this brings me back to what you knew already: that successful Writing Associate candidates must display responsibility, organization, and a willingness to learn more.

# Two WAs Publish Article

Heather Bastian and Lindsey Harkness recently placed "When Peer Tutors Write About Writing: Literacy Narratives and Self Reflection" in the journal *Young Scholars in Writing: Undergraduate Research in Writing and Rhetoric*.

Bastian and Harkness argue that much can be learned about writing instruction and education in general by studying the work of proficient writers, such as WAs. They conducted, as part of an EXCEL project, a qualitative study of some of the literacy narratives written by WAs over the past several years. The field of Composition, they contend, needs to pay more attention to how "good" writers write. Below is an excerpt from their conclusion.

Our research has brought to light the importance of studying both literacy narratives and competent college writers. In fact, we would argue that any writing program that involves undergraduate tutors (and possibly even graduate teaching assistants) would benefit from the incorporation of the literacy narrative assignment into its training program. First, the literacy narrative allows students an opportunity to create their own narratives and to speak in their own voices. Second, it allows students to explore and reflect on the often unconscious learning process. And finally, it invites students to step back and examine their roles, which allows students a greater level of self-reflection.

But another point we want to make is the importance of such work—the careful reading and interpretation of "proficient" writing by "proficient" writers—for the field of composition studies as a whole. As we noted earlier in our essay, the composition discourse community tends to render the "good writer" invisible, focusing instead on the ill-prepared writer—the "basic" writer who "lacks" certain skills or is unfamiliar with the conventions of academic discourse. That emphasis is not surprising, and we do not mean to disparage it. After all, narratives that move from failure to success, from lack to fulfillment are good stories, are interesting to write and compelling to read. Certainly, there is much to learn about writing from challenges faced by the unprepared or confused writer.

But, still, we would also argue that there is a great deal that can be learned about writing from listening to what the "good writer" has to say. For example, from our research we learned that the traditional understanding of the teacher/student relationship is powerfully imprinted on students. To transform this relationship from a binary into a dialogical one, much work must be done, work, we would argue, which is best initiated through extended self-reflections provided by such instruments as literacy narratives. Still, this is not all we learned about "good writing" from examining these narratives. We also learned that students' conceptions about writing abilities and writing components change over time due to various forces. And, most importantly, we learned that student writers need to foster self-reflection by questioning and reflecting upon how their writing histories and their understandings of writing influence their work as student writers and peer tutors.

Finally, all these considerations point to the importance of teachers listening to what students themselves have to say about their development as writers. We sought to do the same in our essay and studies. The literacy narrative is one tool that allows students a forum through which they can explore their development as writers. But there are certainly others, such as portfolios and journals. These devices of writing, reflecting, talking back, talking about, and self-representing all have in common the ability to serve as what Linda Alcoff refers to as a "countersentence." Alcoff believes that instead of speaking about or for others, we should speak to others so that they can "produce a countersentence that can suggest a new historical narrative" (23). In other words, students need to be allowed the opportunity to engage in the rhetoric of the composition field, so that they can create more accurate representations of themselves.

As we have explored throughout this essay, when students are allowed to create "countersentences," we see a new image of the student appear. We see students with intelligent, well-thought ideas concerning writing, individuality, and learning. The discourse community of composition can then learn about the concerns of student writers and student writing from the writers themselves. Just as we, as students, listened to our student colleagues' voices and learned a great deal, so do we, in turn, invite you to listen to the voices of others.

## Work Cited

Alcoff, Linda. "The Problem of Speaking for Others." *Cultural Critique* 20 (1991-1992 Winter) 5-32.



# The Director's Corner

by Patricia Donahue

It's that time of year when the College Writing Program hires Writing Associates for next year. Perhaps a few words about our hiring policies—and other related matters—would be helpful.

1. Each year we hire approximately 30-40% of the students who apply. That group includes experienced Writing Associates who want to work an additional year.
2. The students who apply to be Writing Associates tend to have very high GPAs—at least 3.5 and over. The minimum GPA to apply is 3.0. We have hired students in the past whose GPAs are lower, but those tend to be special cases: students who started out in one field, discovered they lacked an affinity, and switched to another.
3. Faculty members are asked each year to nominate students. Nominated students receive personal invitations. Some nominees mistakenly believe that a recommendation guarantees a position. Others assume that they are hired by the recommender and not the program. Such students rarely perform well as WAs. And because they may resent having to attend staff meetings and training sessions, they usually are not reappointed.
4. Faculty sometimes nominate as WAs students who have served as their research assistants and/or Excel scholars. These students tend to be juniors who never displayed an interest in the program before and may want only to add an item to their resumes. While the desire to enrich a resume is understandable, especially for students considering law school or graduate study, it should not be a primary motivation. The best WAs tend to be strong students who have a genuine interest in language matters and enjoy discussing issues of reading, writing, and analysis with their peers.
5. Prospective Writing Associates participate in a long hiring process. They take a grammar test; they submit examples of their own work; they write an essay describing their interest in the program; they provide a list of courses taken and grades received. They are asked to provide the names of three faculty recommenders who are sent forms which, if completed, are placed in the candidate's file. Files are reviewed by a faculty administrator who decides whether the candidate should be interviewed, based on the composite picture of abilities and strengths established in the range of materials already described. Interviews generally last 20 minutes. They are conducted by a faculty administrator and two current Writing Associates. In addition to a question and answer session, a simulation is undertaken, whereby the WA acts the role of a student writer and the candidate pretends to be a Writing Associate. They discuss a paper which the candidate has received ahead of time, a paper written by a "typical" student writer whose name remains anonymous.
6. Once a candidate is hired, he or she is sent a series of essays on composition theory and practice, is required to attend a 5 hour workshop at the beginning of the fall semester, and is also required to attend weekly staff/training sessions. All workshops and training sessions are designed to enable the WA to work more effectively by developing his or her awareness of language and analytical issues.
7. Every year at least one faculty member remarks to a member of the CWP administrative staff that he or she is surprised that this or that student was hired. "But she wasn't the best writer in my class," we are told. That may very well be the case. But the best writers are not always the best readers, and WAs are hired primarily for their ability to identify possibilities, difficulties, and stress points in other people's work.
8. Every year, at least a few faculty members, despite our directives, insist on using WAs as a proofreading service. The result may be "cleaner" prose, but not a better understanding of grammatical and punctuation conventions. When students are told to expect others to edit their prose, they never become accountable for their work as "final product," nor do they become personally invested in it. Also, it is often the case that what faculty members identify as "grammatical error" (and we have seen this happen again and again in workshops) is not a "mistake" as such but a moment of conceptual confusion or a stylistic infelicity.
9. Finally, we ask you to meet regularly with the WA assigned to your course, to share your ideas about "effective" and "ineffective" writing, to discuss the conventions of reading and writing in your discipline, and to review in detail examples of "good" student writing.