Welcome to the first edition of the national peer tutor newsletter—*The Dangling Modifier!* We hope you will come to our workshop session at 11:00 on Sunday to give your input and suggestions.

The idea for this newsletter began at last year's conference in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Tutors from the Penn State Writing Center staff returned from the conference excited and inspired. "I wish we could do that twice a year," they chimed. "Wouldn't it be terrific to talk with tutors from other places more often during the year?" The tutors who had not been able to attend were interested in the idea of "talking" with other tutors. And so the idea for a national newsletter was born.

We were not certain if other tutors would be interested in a national newsletter. Response to our summer survey, however, told us they were. We decided to create a model newsletter and present it at the '94 conference (and here it is!). We envision this newsletter as a publication *for* peer tutors and *by* peer tutors.

We, at Penn State, would like to be instrumental in starting a newsletter whose publication, like the Conference itself, will eventually be passed from one writing center to another. A nominal subscription fee will cover the modest costs so editing writing centers will not have to foot the bill in money, only in time. Having a national newsletter will allow writing tutors to work on a large scale editing project, to write for a national publication, and to work and learn with tutors across the country. If you cannot attend the Sunday session, please leave your name and address at the conference registration desk for subscription information.

**The Write Joke**  
*By Deidra Minemier, The Pennsylvania State University*

One afternoon, an industrious yet worried student came into the Writing Center for help with a paper. "I'm a freshman," she said, "and it feels like forever since I've written anything. Do you think we could check my paper to make sure that it flows and to check that I've used correct grammar?" Feeling quite confident, I said, "You've come to the right place. We can address any concerns you have with your paper."

"Great—I've been really worried about this." She got her paper out of a folder, and placed it on the table in front of us.

"Ummm..." my voice cracked, "you're paper is in French..."
What's My Role? When a Student is Offensive to You: Where (How?) to Draw the Line.
By Cathy Darrup, Bucknell University

"I can agree that the center should not be viewed as a dry cleaners, where anyone can just drop off papers or a dirty draft and come back an hour later expecting their fundamentals to be folded, their grammar to be put through the gentle cycle, their style starched, and their content to be crisp and clean."
- University of Maine Writing Center Newsletter

Late one night, a male first-year student (I'll call him "Nick") came to a Writing Center satellite office where I was working. He had developed a draft of a paper on *Pride and Prejudice*. He seemed concerned that he did not articulate his ideas clearly enough, and was looking for "a new set of ears." As I listened to his introductory comments and as he began to read his paper out loud, I got the impression that he wasn't quite comfortable with certain concepts within his paper. The professor was "a radical feminist/" Nick said, and he seemed to be very aware of that fact as he was writing his paper. It soon became apparent that he disagreed with the professor's attitudes, but felt as though he had to conform to them in order to achieve a successful grade. The consequent tension unmasked instead of disguised his ignorance of and resistance to the ideas that contribute to "feminism." As the session progressed, Nick demonstrated a similar ignorance and resistant attitude toward anti-racism and sexual tolerance.

Moreover, Nick automatically assumed (perhaps because I was white too, didn't wear a T-shirt saying "I am a feminist" and didn't "look gay," whatever that means) that I agreed with his attitudes. In a spirit that was perhaps characteristic of his ignorance, he would say "I hope you aren't a feminist/homosexual/sensitive to the minority cause, but..." and would follow with a sweeping generalization or "I hate it when" clause that was informed only by negative stereotypes. Nick's paper itself was not problematic for me; it was very "neutral" so as not to offend his professor. Consequently his negative (and, to me, offensive) attitudes were pushed to the periphery of his paper, but remained at an unavoidable center of discussion during our session.

My immediate reaction was that I couldn't let Nick's negative stereotypes pass as though they were unnoticed, as though I was unaffected by them. Our session provoked a whirlwind of emotions and pointed questions I had to address: How possible is it for a tutor to remove herself from a student's attitudes, and consequently his writing? How does a tutor deal with a student whose attitudes are personally and morally offensive to her? Does she, in fact, deal with the issue at all, or does she "let it pass" in the interest of maintaining a degree of "professionalism"? Or does she define one aspect of "professionalism" in terms of confronting that person's attitude so as to maintain a degree
of her own self-respect? What if the student's attitudes are reflected in his paper? While it's true that the tutor is not responsible for what she perceives as "negative opinions" in a paper, does she have a responsibility to at least inform the student of the potentially offensive tone of his paper?

Nick's paper, as I said, was not offensive; what was problematic was the conversation his paper instigated. Within his first two paragraphs, for example. Nick wrote about the women's mother "marrying them off so that they would be safe." That, of course, is a true and neutral interpretation of the text; that was not the problem. The problem developed when, at this point, I decided to deal with Nick's underlying, truer opinions by presenting this women's issue in a non-threatening, joking manner. I mentioned, in what I thought was a joking manner, how "ancient" a notion it is to "marry women off." Nick immediately took a defensive stance and "joked" right back that I was "another one of those feminist-types." He proceeded to tell me about the atmosphere within the classroom when his professor identifies a similarly sensitive topic. "Most of the guys laugh about it," he said, "but we all felt very uncomfortable when we went to buy our books in that bookstore downtown that's run by femi-nazis. There's even a sign outside that says 'for women only.'" (I happen to frequent "that bookstore downtown" and their sign, coincidentally, reads "For women, children, and friends.")

Nick then expanded the conversation to include various social issues that relate to oppressed groups, such as racism and homophobia. As a white male, he said, he is no longer the majority because the conglomeration of minority groups outweighs his group. He doesn't understand, either, why "all these groups," homosexuals in particular, want special rights, more rights than he has. We talked for at least a half an hour about these ideas. It had become clear that we did not agree on most of the points when Nick stopped that part of the session and said, "Well, I guess you don't want to finish reading my paper." I explained that just because he and I disagree doesn't mean I can't do my job. So we continued and finished working through the paper. At that point Nick "joked" that he was going to tell his friends to never come to the Writing Center because they'll have to constantly be "on their toes." Whether he was serious or not was irrelevant to the fact that he was leaving our session with a negative impression of the Writing Center. Was I wrong to point out the problems with presupposing another person's opinions? Was it my place to do that? Should I steel myself against the likelihood of a similar situation happening again? Should I feign disinterest next time? What's my role?

The whole evening would have been the worst nightmare experience if Nick hadn't stopped on his way out and said "I don't want to make any enemies, let's talk about this some more." So we talked, for another hour, about our disagreements and, more importantly, about why we disagree. Again, however, I was addressing sensitive questions: was it my responsibility to try to make amends? Was I trying to protect the Writing Center's image or my own?

How possible is it for a tutor to remove herself from a student's attitudes, and consequently his writing? How does a tutor deal with a student whose attitudes are personally and morally offensive to her?
I think that Nick and I reached an understanding by stepping into the other's perspective and listening to that person's concerns. I think I left the Writing Center that night more sensitive to Nick's position: he presented it as "threatened" and I can now at least empathize with him at a more understanding level. I can't speak for Nick's feelings, but he took the time to listen to my position and is at least more informed about it now. If he does feel that he needs to be more "on his toes" in everyday conversation, maybe that isn't such a bad thing.

Feature Writing Center
Pennsylvania State University
By Kary Latham

Among the most powerful components of our weekly staff meetings are "staff developments." These pockets of time, usually fifteen to twenty minutes in length, give our peer tutors better techniques to use when tutoring, greater facility in their own writing, and the chance to become more familiar with their fellow tutors' opinions.

Topics range from detailed explanations of assignments given in composition courses to issues that arise in tutoring sessions each week. We try our best to make the staff developments interactive and fun. For instance, one peer tutor divided our staff into groups of two, gave each group knitting needles and a set of knitting instructions, and had one member of the group read the instructions to the other member, who was holding the needles. The staff learned how difficult it is to grasp a new topic through verbal instruction alone. In another staff development we rhetorically analyzed parts of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail" and discussed tactics for tutoring writers with similar rhetorical analysis assignments. In both cases, our tutors learned more about their own writing techniques as well as how to work with the writers who come to talk with us.

FACTOIDS:
- Staff size: 22
- 4 general locations and 3 athletic study halls
- University enrollment: 40,000
- 3 credit, semester-long tutor training course
- Tutorials conducted: approx. 2600 per year
- Drop-in hours and limited appointment hours
At the University of Maryland, University College, tutors have spent the last year tutoring on-line as part of a grant-funded project. From our perspective as tutors, this experience has revealed both advantages and disadvantages.

Many regular users of e-mail networks report that such communication tends to diminish hierarchical differences. Likewise, tutors report that students tend to open up and say more with on-line tutoring. Tutors and students who work together over time say they feel more like pen pals. Clearly, this kind of tutoring also diminishes the intrusion of some stereotypes, for gender and race are ambiguous with some names, and age and class often cannot be detected. But on-line tutoring also means that tutors can't use other signals, like body language, to gauge the session's progression and make decisions about how to proceed. Humor and sarcasm prove especially difficult, and tutors must be particularly careful not to offend inadvertently. They report missing laughter!

While some tutors see the lack of verbal exchange as a disadvantage, others believe that students gain from having a written copy of the tutor's suggestions. On the other hand, written comments can sometimes seem more authoritative, permanent, and directive. Occasionally, lacking the ability to elucidate more information often confuses the tutor. Details that can be straightened out quickly in a face-to-face session, like ambiguous language, sometimes confound both tutors and students. In such cases, a tutor often emails brief questions to the student before continuing with comments. Likewise, students can use e-mail to request clarification when they receive the tutor's responses. Certainly, on-line tutoring does not replace the traditional writing center. What it does, however, is make tutorial assistance available to many students who might otherwise be unable to take advantage of it.

I Was Just Thinking…”

Insights about the Work We Share
By Craig Johnson, Rollins College

Sometimes I think the Writing Center isn’t about writing papers at all. I told a class that came [to the Writing Center] that the ticket to get[ting] into the Writing Center is an idea. You don't need to have a completed paper that has been revised fifteen times before you make an appointment. That's not what the Writing Center is about- if it were, we'd all be out of a job! An idea is what begins a paper. An idea is what begins the writing process. [As writing tutors], we usher ideas in, discuss them, and get them on their way to becoming part of a paper…
TALK BACK
A writer’s comments

The last time I got help at the Writing Center, I was working on a poem. My problem was how to write the paper, even how to begin. I could have been making it harder than it really was but being clueless left me frustrated. The tutor I was with was really no help. The premise of her assistance was asking me, "What do you think?" I felt trapped once I was there. Being asked the questions was not helping, so I failed to see the point of the session. I realized I could be home asking myself the same questions and getting as far. I had no idea what the poem meant and even beginning was troubling me. What I was basically looking for was "Hey, look, I see you're struggling so here are a few suggestions on how I would begin." I wasn't looking for someone to write the paper, just someone to provide a method. I do not think that giving a few alternative ways of writing a paper is cheating. In my case, I just needed someone to uncork my bottle so my wine could flow.

Breaking through Old Barriers
Working with Non-native Speakers of English
By Callie Hallmark
University of Montevallo

I have recently had the good fortune to be assigned a regular meeting time each week tutoring a foreign student in writing. I say "fortunate" because this young man is helping me to realize that some of the traditional English writing conventions are stale, over-used, and basically boring.

Over the years, certain phrasal expressions and word order choices have become typical of English dialogue and composition. As a result, sometimes it seems that all native English speakers sound alike. All too frequently, we unthinkingly place the subject before the verb or the complement, we position adjectives before the words they describe, and heaven forbid that we should ever ask a rhetorical question in the body of an academic essay! In our efforts to ensure coherence, the pitfalls of maintaining parallelism sometimes trap us into repetitive and stylistically monotonous text. To a certain extent, the creativity has been taken out of writing and replaced with something not unlike a computer program of composition which we automatically turn on whenever we sit down to write.

At my first tutoring session with Jan, an industrious, intelligent young man from Poland, I noticed a profound difference in his writing style and that of myself and most of my peers. Because he is not a native English speaker, Jan is not subject to the same built-in rules that those of us who grew up in American elementary schools find ourselves bogged down in. I was reluctant even to offer my advice, because I didn't want to interfere with his unique style and the beauty of his words. On the other hand, I was afraid that his professor might object to some of the ways he phrased his ideas because his style was so different—sometimes sounding almost incorrect by our traditional rules. In his essay, Jan uses commas to link together a string of adjectives describing America in a way that most
native English speakers/writers would avoid. He states: *The primary reason I came [to America] was to perfect my English, but there was also something like a fascination with the place, on the one hand, so similar to Europe, on the other hand, so different, and because of this, so amazing.*

Somehow, I just couldn't bring myself to ask him to change very many of his words. This young writer had something I had been striving to find all my academic life--a unique style all his own that I believe an audience would find both charming and engaging.

I am glad, now, that I resisted the urge to overly revise Jan's work. I believe that we, as tutors, must be extremely cautious in the suggestions we make to our fellow students, or we may find ourselves changing an author's style or main ideas, rather than simply helping someone to better understand and use the writing process to their advantage. Particularly with non-native English speakers, I think that tutors should be painstakingly careful to ensure that we do not unwittingly change the whole idea behind the writer's words. Often, a foreign student may not know the right words to use to express the desired meaning. In this case, I feel that the best thing to do is to encourage the student to talk aloud about the idea he/she is trying to express and then write it down in his/her own words. This method will help to guarantee that the essence of the author's words is not lost through editing, and it will better preserve the student's creative style.

*There are some punctuations that are interesting and there are some that are not.*

- Gertrude Stein

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**The Dangling Modifier**

**The Name Game**

*Tutoring terms across the nation*

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**Marketing Your Writing Center Experience**

-or- *How to Use the Writing Center in Your Job Hunt*

By Shelby McClintock ('92)

- Include your tutoring experience in your work history. Several years at one job demonstrates consistency.
- Take stock of your writing center skills. As a tutor, you negotiate, advise, edit, collaborate, listen, and write. You know how to work as part of a team (with your co-workers) and you know how to work with a wide variety of people (with the writers). You can manage many tasks at once (you balance a heavy academic schedule with extracurricular activities and your job responsibilities.) Emphasize your diversity and adaptability!
• Remember to include these skills in your job descriptions for chronological resumes, or your skill areas for functional resumes. Don't forget about the extra things you do for the Writing Center. Include your time as the treasurer, or the fact that you developed promotional materials (posters and flyers) on your resume.
• Most employers are concerned ability to work as part of a team. Emphasize your collaborative experience. Discuss in detail how your ability to work with others on large and small projects will make you a valuable employee.
• If you have attended or presented at conferences, don't forget to include this in your resume and your cover letters. Public speaking and presenting are a part of any job eventually. Your already developed skills will be an asset.
• If you create any printed material for your center, be sure your name is on it somewhere. These will come in handy when you are asked for samples of your marketing work. (Even if you think you may never want to be in marketing, this may be the extra that gets you the job!)
• Ask your Writing Center Director to be a reference for you. Ask him or her to keep a record of your activity with the Writing Center on file for future reference (compose a list yourself). You might even ask for a general letter to take with you upon graduation.

Tutoring, Learning, and Teaching?
From the University of Maine Writing Center Newsletter

I've been feeling extremely frustrated lately about my preconceptions on tutoring. At the heart of the matter, I believe, is the question of whether or not we are teachers. Despite all our best intentions and desires to the contrary, my final analysis is that, indeed, we are teachers, though perhaps not in the normal manner associated with that word. We certainly don't want students to leave having gained nothing from their visits, do we? Of course not. So, re-phrasing things, in an admittedly provocative choice of words, we want students to learn from their experiences here. The unavoidable correlative is that someone must teach them. (Goodness, there's that hated word!) There are different definitions of "teach," though. In formalized courses, faculty members teach "to impart knowledge" or "to instruct." That definition implies a hierarchy of teacher over student, knowledge-possessor over knowledge-seeker. Our function as teachers, though, is "to cause to learn by example or experience." If faculty members are educators, then we are educational catalysts because, in a sense, we do educate. Using "educate" as a synonym for "teach," the American Heritage Dictionary (the same used above) notes that the former word "often implies formal instruction but especially stresses the development of innate capacities." Isn't the second half of that definition an accurate description of our purpose—to help develop students' innate capacities? Clearly, we do teach, though admittedly in a very different manner from the way faculty members teach. Our problem is what [a tutor] so accurately termed this afternoon an "overactive superego." We're so afraid of being likened to instructors and authority figures that we leap back at the merest hint of being associated with them. We may not instruct, train, or school our fellow students, but we do teach. How do I know for sure? Look up "teach" in Roget's II—it'll tell you to go to "educate." Go there and you'll find that one of its synonyms is "tutor."
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