

Welcome to the second edition of the national peer tutor newsletter: *The Dangling Modifier*! Some of you may be receiving this publication for the first time and we want to tell you about what it is and how it began.

The idea for this newsletter began at the 1993 National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing 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 also 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, so we decided to create a model and present it at the '94 National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing. We envisioned this newsletter as a publication *for* peer tutors and *by* peer tutors. We collected submissions from writing centers across the country and created the first issue of *The Dangling Modifier*.

Conference-goers responded positively to our idea. The conference was abuzz with talk of the new publication; tutors and directors alike were excited about the project! We asked for suggestions and criticisms and now we have used these comments to develop policies and, hopefully, a tradition that will make *The Dangling Modifier* a part of ongoing nationwide peer tutor conversation.

We at Penn State would like to be instrumental in starting this newsletter, whose editorship will eventually be passed from one writing center to another. *The Dangling Modifier* will provide writing tutors with the opportunity to work on a large scale editing project, to write for a national publication, and to work and learn with tutors across the country. We are excited about the response we have gotten to this publication. We look forward to its continuing development! Please let us know what you think and get involved by sending us your comments, ideas, and submissions!

**Desktop Publishing: The Future of Tutoring**  
**J. Darren Bishop, *Indiana University of PA***

As computer technology marches on, campuses nationwide are upgrading their computer labs with better and more complicated software. Desktop publishing is one of the newer phenomena in the software market and an increasing number of college writing centers and computer labs are acquiring these programs. With the flexibility and technical potential that desktop publishers offer comes the potential for new challenges for tutors. Students are coming in with more advanced problems — both technological and textual. For colleges with writing centers that double as computer labs, like ours at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, it is becoming imperative that tutors upgrade their technical knowledge. Luckily for us, we've only installed our desktop publishing software in the computers at the tutor desk. This allows us to "play" with the program in order to get a better feel for it before we install it in all of the computers. At that point, students will ask new and more challenging computer questions.

However important it may be that we have the technical knowledge, the main function of our writing center — like most — is tutoring. Desktop publishing allows more advanced students to write more technical documents like manuals, newsletters, and even more effectively use fonts and spacing in "normal" essays. As this happens, students will demand of tutors a better knowledge of technical writing techniques. Students will begin to ask a new breed of questions: "Did I use white space effectively here?" or "How can I improve the visual layout of this paper in order to make it easier to understand?" Obviously this new mode of questioning has the potential to be more challenging than "Do I need a comma here?"

This is not to say that the job of the tutor is easy now; I merely wish to point out the potential which desktop publishing offers for more challenging — and exciting — tutoring sessions. As the world further hurls itself into the computer age, the world of the tutor must adapt. Desktop publishing offers the tutor not only a challenge for tutoring sessions, but also a chance to better his or her own skills in technical writing — skills that can only help one's marketability in the "real world."

**Top Ten Reasons to Be a Peer Tutor in Writing**

10. Learn more about your own writing than you ever wanted to.
9. Where else can you work with so many great minds?
8. The paperwork's a breeze.
7. Kenneth Bruffee.
6. Finally get to learn the difference between a misplaced modifier and a dangling one!
5. Two words: Peer Tutor.
4. Finally get to understand the Freshman English assignments that you had two years ago.
3. Can get involved in cool national publications, like *The Dangling Modifier*!
2. Always have access to style manuals.
1. Two more words: free pens.

## Confessions of a UWC

Valerie Balling, *Michigan State University*

I need to make a confession. My job as an Undergraduate Writing Consultant is really reconnaissance work. I am stealing ideas for future use in my chosen profession as a high school English teacher. I am guilty of espionage, and I am proud of it.

Okay, my job is not really something out of a great spy novel, but I am collecting many wonderful ideas about writing that I cannot wait to use in my classroom. I like to think of myself as a *special* "agent of change" (as Kenneth Bruffee referred to peer tutors in his 1991 keynote address at the National Conference on Peer Tutor when the details seem so minor that they might not appear to be important. But, as any good spy knows, the keynote address at the National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing), because I am learning to be more collaborative in my work instead of relying on an authoritarian approach to teaching. Most of my undercover work takes place in writing consultations with student-clients. My informants (a.k.a. my clients) willingly offer vital information to me about their writing processes. They generally say they need help in the areas of finding a topic, organizing their information, and (although they rarely state it this way) accepting themselves as authorities on their own writing. Through my extensive research, I have been able to smuggle useful information away from these meetings.

All writers can attest to the fact that getting started is probably the most challenging part of the writing process. My informants have told me many times, "I just don't know where to begin," or, "I can't decide on a topic." Using Special Agent strategies, I ask the informants to brief me on their assignments as I boldly take notes in front of them so I have a copy of their words. As we continue the briefing session, I am able to notice a pattern of ideas or subjects that connect with each other. I continue to ask the informants questions even when the details seem so minor that they might not appear to be important. But, as any good spy knows, the key to the case can appear in the very ordinary. Once I have been well-briefed on the topic, I show the informants how much information they have shared with me and some of the patterns they have revealed. The informants are usually amazed at the wealth of knowledge they have and, once a connection is made, they begin to see for themselves the emerging topics of their papers. Silently, I sneak the "briefing technique" into my Special Agent files for future use. The informants simply need another person to help them write down all that resides in their heads. Once these writers are able to see how the process of finding a topic works, getting started is usually not so difficult.

The writing process should not be thought of as painful torture, but should be thought of as inviting and intriguing, like a spy novel in which all the clues build up until the case is solved. As a Special Agent, my main responsibility is to facilitate the interaction between authors and their papers, which is usually difficult because students tend not to see themselves as authorities of their own writing. By working collaboratively with informants to understand the purpose of the paper and to make decisions about their own

writing, I can help them increase their confidence and learn that writing is not really such an arduous task.

My confession is complete and my conscience is clear. I have retained all the information I dug up in my Writing Center work to use on my next assignment, which will be the most challenging one I have ever taken: infiltrating a high school English class. Fortunately, I am well prepared with these methods of collaborative instruction so that I can be a Special Agent of change when I am in the position of teacher. I am confident all will go well because collaborative teaching makes school more intriguing for the students as well as for the teacher. ***This spy business is really fun!***



**The Director's Chair - Ron Maxwell**  
***Penn State University***

There's nothing quite like a writing project for a group of writing tutors! *Producing The Dangling Modifier* has brought welcome challenges to our Writing Center—some we anticipated, some we didn't. Positive responses to the newsletter in Birmingham last November — where we first talked about our ideas with peer tutors and administrators from other centers — charmed us into believing that the project would proceed without a hitch. So much for our naivete!

The flood of submissions to the newsletter did not spontaneously descend upon us in the months following our first call. A lesson lay in that response (or lack of response) that we were slow to learn. Although we knew peer tutors to be reliable sources for the right stuff, we hadn't calculated how much priming the pump would *take*. A further mailing didn't help much either. Material for the second issue came in only after we contacted writing center directors by telephone. Everyone remembered receiving our earlier invitation; most remembered talking with their peer tutors about the opportunity to submit. But nothing had come of it.

I think Ben Rafoth expressed the views of many when he said (in words something like these), "I know that all in our center support the concept of the newsletter, but I have not yet internalized the need to promote it. In the past few weeks alone I have talked with several writers about substantive issues in tutoring, but I did not urge them to write their ideas up for the newsletter. I must remember to do that in the future whenever our tutors express their valuable insights."

And I would hope that all center directors will do as Ben vows to do. Then, over time, peer tutors in dozens of centers will acquire the habit of writing and submitting material to *The Dangling Modifier*, thus helping us to make this publication the national forum for peer tutoring in writing that we expect it to become. But that means we must all begin again priming the pump. So, write on!

## **The Ideal and the Real: 1995 National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing**

**Paul L. Little**

*Penn State University*

The 12th annual National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing is scheduled to be held on the campus of Ball State University October 27 to 29, 1995. It will be cosponsored by East Central University and Ball State University. The conference theme, The Ideal and The Real, originates from the conflict between the peer tutoring ideal, which is grounded in collaborative learning theory, and actual peer tutoring practices.

More than thirty peer tutors from East Central and Ball State helped to plan the conference, which will feature peer tutor keynotes, two guest speaker keynotes, and entertainment. For the peer tutor keynote, tutors are invited to participate in a contest, submitting both written and audio versions of the keynote they would like to present. A panel of judges will select two peer tutors to give the keynotes at the Saturday banquet. Two guest speakers, Wendy Bishop and Muriel Harris, are tentatively scheduled to begin and end the Conference with keynote addresses. The Conference planners have scheduled a party in the hope of making the Conference even more entertaining for peer tutors.

Cindy Johaneck, Ball State's Writing Center Director, says an information package including registration and tentative program information, will be available in the upcoming months.

Conference proposals are due May 15, 1995 and may follow any of several avenues, including, but not limited to, the following:

1. What are the values, attitudes, and beliefs behind the peer tutoring ideal, and how are they supported or denied by the realities of life in tutorial centers?
2. What do our traditional ideals suggest about direction for the upcoming realities of assessment, budget crunches, political conservatism, and technological advances?
3. How do the conflicts between the real and the ideal reflect on our individual centers and on the responsibility of our organizations?
4. What theories and practices have enabled us to reach our full potential, successfully managing the real and maintaining the ideal? What new theories and practices might better enable us to manage the conflicts?

The National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing is always an exciting educational and social event! Tutors gain valuable experience by presenting on and learning more about their practices by talking and befriending peer tutors from around the country.

### **From Tutoring to Teaching**

**Paul Mahaffey, *University of Montevallo***

When I began my first year of graduate school, I was asked if I would be interested in working in the Harbert Writing Center as a tutor. Although my answer was "yes," there was some reservation in the back of my mind. I had some strong ideas associated with the word "tutor." I envisioned a tutor as an exceptional student who helped those of us who could not grasp the concept of a particular subject. Even though I was an English major and I enjoyed reading and writing, I did not see myself as being able to tutor anyone.

This thought gave birth to the questions I often pondered as I conducted my first tutoring sessions. As a tutee sat there and listened to the observations, suggestions, and criticisms I made about the paper, I wondered whether or not anything I was saying was being understood. I also questioned my own credibility as I worked with a tutee. Would tutees hold me responsible if they did not get the grades they expected? Despite the training I went through prior to tutoring and the reassurance provided by the "veterans" of the Writing Center, these concerns were at the forefront of my thoughts.

However, as time went on, I began to realize that although a tutor is usually a student who is a bit more "in the know" on a particular subject, tutors are not expected to know everything. I observed that the atmosphere of the Harbert Writing Center was one of cooperation and consultation. If a tutor was not fully aware of a particular concept, there was no hesitation in asking another tutor for advice, even in the presence of a tutee. Needless to say, I soon felt more confident during tutoring sessions and this confidence was reflected in the faces of those I tutored.

The experience and training I received from the Writing Center was extremely influential in my decision to teach a freshman English class. With many hours of tutoring sessions under my belt, I began to direct a classroom through the fundamentals of writing. Although I was nervous, I just pretended that the class was really a group tutoring session and took it from there. Any success that results from the teaching career I have chosen has its roots in my writing center experience.

### **Comma Usage Problems**

**Jennifer L. Meyers, *Indiana University of Pennsylvania***

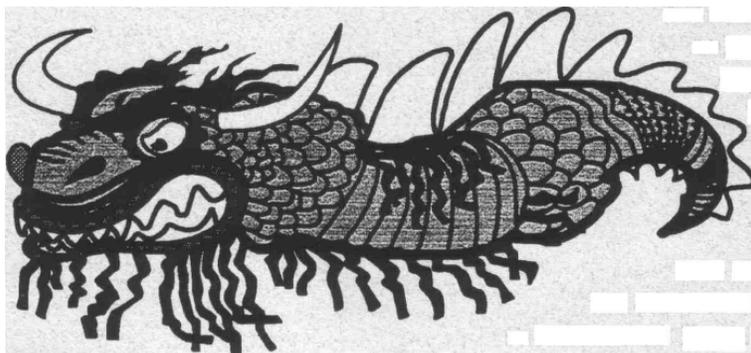
It's just another typical session that begins with the request, "Can you look over my paper for punctuation errors, especially commas?" Automatically, I begin wondering if the writer is "comma happy" or "comma scared" and within the first few minutes, we're reading as if we have asthma. It's a "comma happy writer."

"The scientist suggested, that people need to conserve energy, which will then, help save the resources on the planet," The writer suggests rewording the sentence, breaking the sentence into two, or removing some commas. We are able to go through the rest of the paper without respiratory problems. Sure, there are still some questions about usage, but

the writer can fix 80 percent of the errors. The writer now has the awareness that sentence flow, not to mention oxygen flow, is necessary for the reader.

Shortly after my asthma attack, I received the request again. This time, as the writer and I read through the opening paragraph, our faces had a tint of blue. Before we passed out, a comma appeared in the text and we took a gasp of oxygen. Again, we took the time to discuss why the reading of the text was not smooth. The writer took note that the reader had a lot of words to read before coming to the end of the sentence. By focusing on one particular sentence, "The critic suggested that the author who is now on the best seller list was inspired by his family to write their history one that is quite interesting," the writer was able to recognize that several combined thoughts appeared and that they needed to be clarified. We were ready to continue reading the text, adding breaths of air when we needed them. Yes, there were still usage problems, but at least we were breathing.

Comma usage is a typical problem. However, by giving the writer a chance to read the written text, he or she can easily recognize that problems exist within the piece. Furthermore, discussing the writer's options allows him or her to choose how the text is to be read. Finally, by giving the advice of "letting the oxygen flow" or "taking the time to breathe," I have found my respiratory problems minimized and the writer's correct usage of commas to be maximized.



### **The Five Paragraph Monster**

**Debbie Ralston,  
Michigan State  
University**

Well, I was hoping it would never happen, but alas the inevitable finally did. I went head-to-head with the

dreaded five paragraph monster. At the beginning of a tutoring conference with Jane, I began to see the head of the monster but was hoping it would go away and hide. I spotted it in her outline; she only had three points she wanted to make in her paper. When I saw that her paper was likely going to be a five paragraph essay, I asked if her professor had made that stipulation in his assignment. When she shook her head, I thought maybe we could expand the paper by developing her ideas into more than five paragraphs, but my efforts were to no avail.

When I started giving suggestions for her paper, the monster fully appeared. Some of the suggestions I offered I thought were common sense ideas: introduce, explain and tie her quotes to the argument she was making, and explain everything as clearly as possible. However, once I made these suggestions, the monster simply bit right through them. According to Jane, she could not use any of these suggestions. If she did, then her paper would not conform to the way she had been taught to write papers in high school, where the monster had been born. As Jane explained, she could only have three main ideas, and

two supports or sentences for each idea. When I told her that I had never heard of writing papers this way before, she looked at me like I was an alien. It was here that I realized I was no longer working with a college student, but battling with a monster, a monster that had Jane in its grip.

I would not have been so frustrated by this conference if she had not been so brainwashed. Every time I offered a suggestion, Jane said, "I can see your point, but I can't do that because..." She could only use a certain number of sentences for each idea. If Jane had refused my ideas because she did not agree with what I was saying or because she did not like my ideas, I could have dealt with that. What I could not deal with was that she was under the control of the monster, who had brainwashed her into believing she could only have a specific number of sentences for each idea. I had gone head-to-head with this monster, and lost.

### **UVM Tutors Tackle Cross Disciplinary Writing** **Michelle Richards, *University of Vermont***

Have any of you English majors ever had to tutor a chemistry lab report? Any bio majors been trapped in a session with a philosophy student? Well, scenarios like these were becoming more and more frequent at our writing center at the University of Vermont. We were discovering that despite the movement toward a writing standard across the curriculum, there are certain differences in format and style across the disciplines that cannot be ignored in tutoring sessions. Different patterns of thinking result in different patterns of writing. So, in an attempted solution to our frustration, five tutors envisioned a handbook, written by and for tutors, that would outline and present examples of writing in a variety of disciplines

Our vision became a reality at the New England Writing Centers Association (NEWCA) Conference on March 4 in Nashua, New Hampshire. We presented the process of creating the handbook, from the initial vocalization of the problem to the compiling of information, and presented the audience with a prototype of the final product, a handbook entitled, "Writing Across the Disciplines, *An Insider's View*." The product was designed for the hypothetical tutor who has just realized that an upcoming session revolves around an unfamiliar subject area. With the handbook as a reference in the writing center, all the tutor needs to do is look up that subject to determine if any special formats or guidelines require adherence, glance at the sample text, take a deep breath, and go into the session feeling more relaxed and prepared.

After deciding that tutoring student papers in unfamiliar disciplines was a problem, we went through a number of steps to gather information for the handbook and to ensure its accuracy. We each tackled our own majors and made outlines of what we thought to be the most important qualities of writing in those areas. For example, psychology research reports must follow a specific five-part format, whereas philosophy papers must often follow a flow pattern, in which one argument flows into two opinions, which flow into more opinions, which all must be presented. To ensure that our ideas were on target, we met with professors from our disciplines in a panel discussion. We discovered similarities

as well as striking differences among writing styles and formats, but in the meantime, gained the crucial understanding that writing *does* reflect a way of thinking.

The process of creating the handbook, which will now serve as a reference for current and future tutors, has led us to many discussions regarding the movement toward writing across the curriculum. Although it would be beneficial in some ways if writing was more uniform in all fields, there are several realities which present themselves in that argument. One of these realities, as we understood at the beginning of the project, but more fully appreciate now, is that writing reflects a way of thinking. If psychologists' thinking patterns differ from those of historians, the writing process, as well as the end result, will also differ. So by offering our tutors this handy reference, we will be moving toward a better understanding of all writing, and enlightening ourselves to the differing thinking patterns of our tutees, so that ultimately we can provide more valuable assistance in the writing center.

### **Finding out What Instructors Think of Us** **Kary Latham, *Penn State University***

While some college-level writing centers employ fifty tutors and others ten, and some see thousands of pieces of writing every year and others hundreds, they all have one thing in common: business is never slow for long. Matching demand for tutoring with an appropriate supply inevitably becomes a breathless, time-consuming task. Despite the frantic nature of our work, we of course want to remain in prime tutoring condition.

At Penn State, University Park Campus (40,000 students), we've drawn up a short questionnaire allowing writers to evaluate us, and we observe one another two times each year to get feedback on our performance. However, there's not always energy left over for engineering "outreach" programs to university faculty, finding out how this influential part of our tutoring triangle views us. As the faculty is our principle sources of publicity, this constitutes an unfortunate shortcoming.

To find out more about what instructors think of us, a group of our tutors wrote a survey and sent it out to Fall 1994 instructors of composition courses. Our aim was to present our results at the November 1994 "National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing" in Birmingham, Alabama. Those of you who heard our presentation there will find the following summary of our results familiar going. Others may be surprised by our discoveries.

In response to "Why do you suggest that your students utilize peer tutor services," instructors responded predictably with answers like, "All writers can use advice," "I don't have enough time in my office hours to examine every student's paper thoroughly before it's handed in," and "Peer tutors understand the writing process." However supportive these answers were, when we asked for reasons behind *not* sending their students to us, we were a little taken aback. Some said we were "too reluctant to be authoritative and release knowledge," that we "provide inconsistent results," and "I can clear up the problem myself" We also designed a question about our qualifications to determine

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whether instructors knew how we are trained and whether our performance was sufficient. Most instructors determined that we were "excellently qualified," "fairly qualified," or somewhere in between. The more instructors knew about our training (tutors take a semester-long, three-credit course that includes an eight week tutoring practicum), the more confidence they had in our abilities. Some instructors found us "dedicated and interested," "well-trained, active and intelligent," and report that "students say service is helpful." Others said that while we were "excellently qualified to work on mechanics" we were "poorly qualified for advanced assignments. This dichotomy of responses characterized our entire survey.

We've tried to take all the answers to heart and have taken a few steps toward changing negative faculty impressions of us. In general, survey results have confirmed our suspicions that publicity efforts have not reached every corner of our campus, and reaffirmed our strong belief in communicating the work we do to a wider audience. If you'd like to know more about how we conducted this survey, or would like a copy of the survey itself, please contact us at the Penn State Writing Center, 219 Boucke Building, University Park, PA 16801.

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