

Channeling Rachel Ray in the Writing Center: The 30-Minute Workshop

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The authors first presented the following piece with Villanova University Writing Center Director Mary Beth Simmons as a workshop at the 2010 Mid-Atlantic Writing Center Association Conference. Rachel Ray did not endorse the workshop or this article, and we do not claim to use her brand.

We are not fans of Rachel Ray's cooking show, her business model, or her flagrant use of the acronym "EVOO" (extra virgin olive oil). What we do value is her "30-Minute Meals" concept and how we can adopt it to teaching first-year students. In 2004, as part of an effort to expand our writing instruction beyond our standard 50 minute one-on-one peer tutoring session, the Villanova Writing Center introduced the "30-Minute Workshop," which we now offer once per week "after hours" at the Center. These workshops are taught by graduate students and lure students in by offering cookies, a handout, and the promise that the session will take only 30 minutes.

Each semester, graduate tutors gather to select a series of 30-Minute Workshop topics, brainstorming common trends that we see every day in the Writing Center. From an influx of students worried about citations in their first research paper to countless essays opening with "Since the dawn of man..." we identify small, manageable issues that arise in tutoring sessions. As we formulate our presentations, we strive for simple ingredients, straightforward recipes, and a friendly, non-threatening environment where students can feel comfortable tackling new ideas without the pressure of a particular assignment. Our hope is that with 30 minutes of focused attention, students will be able to gain another tool for their writing tool-kit: a technique or skill they can use to build more effective papers and to build confidence as writers. Welcoming, easily accessible, and offering hearty leftovers in the form of handouts, the 30-Minute Workshop promotes the Writing Center's versatility, reminding students and faculty that our services and mission are not about papers, but about writers.

The handout has become an important feature not only for students who attend workshops but also for tutors and for the Writing Center's daily operations. As students who have collected and saved effective writing aids from undergraduate and even high school composition courses, we can testify to the usefulness of tangible resources that come from a reliable source and will not change or move unexpectedly—unlike many websites. And as future educators, we appreciate the opportunity to develop our own tool-kit of teaching aids, designed for our teaching styles and reflective of our personalities. Finally, after six years of writing workshops, our Writing Center has collected an arsenal of aids to use in our daily tutoring sessions. Tutors frequently use workshop handouts as an extra reference to explain a technical concept, or as a takeaway when the session has not offered enough time to cover all of the student's concerns.

During the workshops, we arrive with our handouts and a plan to walk students through its key points. We keep the sessions casual by asking students to participate as well as by encouraging

them to speak up with any questions as they arise. For example, a session entitled "What's a Good Word?" begins by asking students how many of them use Microsoft Word's Thesaurus feature to pick synonyms as they write and revise their papers. After a brief rundown of why this may not always be a good idea, and a quick lesson on the difference between "denotation" and "connotation," we ask students to split into pairs or groups for a few minutes. The students work on a sample paragraph containing a series of underlined "bad" words and collaborate to replace them with "good" words. Once students are done with the paragraph, we move onto the second page and give students a summary of why each underlined word was marked as needing improvement, and provide examples of what a "good" word would be along with an explanation of why these words are better.

When students leave the workshop, they receive a certificate of attendance and take their handout with them for future reference. Within the workshop, they have been introduced to, or reminded of, one bite-sized aspect of their writing in a relaxed setting that emphasizes the real-world benefits of what they're learning. The "What's a Good Word?" workshop helps students rethink their process of finding synonyms and avoiding repetition and guides them through a litmus test they can use to choose a "good" word in the future. The workshop has helped them apprehend an easily digestible piece of writing instruction, and they leave feeling equipped to improve one small but important aspect of their writing.

Our contemporary moment is one that encourages technological and computerized solutions to educational dilemmas, so the notion of a paper handout has a certain "retro" appeal in that it isolates one distinctive feature of the writing process and contains it within the space of two pages. While we certainly do not wish to simply revert to pre-internet days of writing instruction or alienate our students, we do believe that easily digestible "small-bites" of information in the form of handouts and brief workshops have an important place in the modern writing center.

Note: Examples of 30-Minute Workshops handouts can be viewed on the [Villanova Writing Center's webpage](#).