

Purdue Writing Lab Report

1988-1989

Muriel Harris, Writing Lab Director

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Writing Lab Report: 1988-89

Summary

Preliminary statistics for 1988-89 indicate that this year the Purdue University Writing Lab served over 8600 students, and judging from the evaluations we've received, our effectiveness remained consistently high. Providing the one-to-one contact writers need to develop their writing skills continued to be our major emphasis. We offered reader response, asked and answered questions, engaged in collaborative conversations about writing and about individual papers, dealt with common but difficult-to-diagnose writing problems, and provided writing help with assignments in composition courses and courses in other departments and schools at Purdue where writing is emphasized.

More particularly, some noteworthy accomplishments of this last year have included the following:

- Offering the resources of the Lab to four Visiting Scholars (from the U. S.S. R. and China) who needed assistance in improving their English skills.
- Using desktop publishing to enhance the visual and instructional effectiveness of numerous existing and newly-written instructional handouts.
- Providing unique learning environments in tutoring practicum courses, particularly useful for prospective teachers and for students preparing for careers in business.
- Offering— for the first time— self-paced, non-credit courses for people in the community who wished to make use of the Lab's facilities and tutors.
- Holding resume workshops for university-sponsored student organizations.
- Hosting visitors from all over the country who made on-site visits to study our Lab in preparation for developing or expanding their own facilities. In particular, when the Indiana University Writing Center responded to the IU President's strong interest in increasing writing in all courses and funding a major expansion of their Writing Center, the Center's director and staff studied our Lab extensively as a model for the expanded center that has been proposed in a report to their President.
- Computerizing our record-keeping system. Although this required a great deal of time and effort and is not yet completed, we hope in the future to provide a more detailed analysis of our work.
- Instituting tutoring awards, to accompany the Department's existing teaching awards, so that excellent tutoring can also be recognized.
- Providing opportunities for our graduate student instructors to engage in professional activities such as publishing articles and presenting papers about writing labs and tutorial instruction.

Staffing and Services

This year's Lab staff consisted of fourteen graduate teaching assistants and myself, plus a receptionist, a secretary, work/study assistance with clerical tasks, a computer consultant, and two groups of undergraduate peer tutors (one group funded by the English Department to tutor English 100 students and the other group funded by other university sources to assist students preparing resumes and job applications). Together, the instructional staff offered tutorials, drop-in assistance on a first-come/first-served basis, workshops, Traveling Teacher sessions in writing classes and in other classrooms across campus, instructional handouts, self-instruction tapes, tutor training practicums, a grammar hotline, computers for word processing and computer-assisted-instruction, and a library of books, journals, and reference materials. The Lab was open five days a week, plus three evenings, for a total of 54 hours/week.

The population whom we served represents a wide variety of writers and teachers, including the following:

- Students enrolled in English Department writing courses (English 100, 101, 102, 103, 109, 304, 420, and 421)
- International students enrolled in courses in the English-as-a-second-language program (English 001,002,100I, 101I, and 102I)
- Students in a variety of literature courses in the English Department
- Students in a variety of Communication Department courses, particularly Communication 114, 144, 252, 315, 324, 353, 414, and 491
- Graduate students taking the English Proficiency Exam in the Office of Writing Review
- Students preparing resumes and letters of application
- Students using computers for writing assignments, simulations, and self-instruction
- Students writing papers for a wide variety of courses in other departments and schools
- Students in three sections of practicum courses in tutoring writing (English 390 and 502W)
- Composition instructors who need professional journals, books, and instructional materials on teaching writing skills
- Purdue faculty who request assistance in adding writing skills to their courses
- Visitors from other schools who seek information and models for starting or expanding writing labs at other institutions

Statistics and Trends

This list summarizes the tables included in Attachment A (page 6):

	Total no. of people	Total no. of uses
No. of tutorial appointments	1110	2144
No. of drop-in sessions	1838	3784
No. of self-instruction modules	160	417
No. attending workshops	52	52
No. attending Traveling Teacher sessions	1489	1489
No. using the English 100 lab	384	1342
No. using the Lab's computers	314	843
No. using Lab handouts	2184	2831
No. of instructors using Lab handouts	86	99
No. of students using the Lab as a writing room	607	1807
No. of grammar hotline calls	452	452
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Total no. using the Writing Lab	8676*	15,260*

Because this is the first year that the records for the Writing Lab were computerized, there were numerous difficulties in data entry and in the initial use of various data sorting programs. Some data collection was incomplete, and other data were lost as work/study helpers learned how to enter information and as students became familiar with filling out record keeping forms in ways that could be read by the computer. Thus, comparisons with last year's figures are difficult to make. However, the computerized tallying of our data has helped to formulate a picture of some of our services:

•About 70-76% of all students using the Writing Lab come for help with papers in English Department writing courses:

- English 101-102: 35-38% (varies from fall to spring semester)
- English 420: 10-12%
- English 100: 10%
- English 109: 10%
- English 103: 2-3%
- English 421: 2-3%

•About 25% of all students using the Writing Lab come either for self-help or for help with papers in courses in other departments and schools at Purdue. The heaviest use for course-related writing is by students in Communication courses (2-3%), with the remainder being

*(plus incomplete data that could not be sorted)

students from a variety of other courses (AG, BC, CDFS, CE, CSR, ED, GER, GS, HIST, IT, ME, MGMT, PE, PHIL, PHRS, POL SCI, PSY, RHI, SUPV) or graduate students working on proposals, papers for publication, or dissertations. Because of incomplete data, we do not know what percentage of these students came for help with resumes and letters of application.

- Of the instructors requesting over 1500 copies of Writing Lab handouts, the majority were composition instructors who noted in evaluations that this was a particularly valuable service that added to the effectiveness of their classroom instruction. In addition, instructors from other departments and schools, including Agricultural Economics, Animal Science, CDFS, Communication, Education, Engineering, Management, Philosophy, and Political Science requested materials to supplement their own instruction or to accompany Writing Lab instructors' presentations in their classes.
- Of the 55 Traveling Teacher sessions, the majority were offered in writing classes in the English Department. Others were offered in other departments and schools and to student organizations such as the Ag Council, the Pharmacy Council, the CFS Honor Society (Omicron Nu), and the Industrial Hygiene Students Association.

Evaluations

As in past evaluations, teachers and students who filled out and returned questionnaires each semester continued to rate the Lab's services very highly, responding that our instruction was effective and that students' writing and their grades improved because of their lab work. Statistics gathered from these questionnaires, sent out both at the end of the Fall 1988 and Spring 1989 semesters, are presented in Attachment B (page 7). In addition to these ratings, a small sampling of comments by both students and their instructors is also included on pages 8-11.

As evident in the ratings and the comments added at the end of the evaluation forms, teachers noted that the Lab performs a valuable service in providing the necessary individualized instruction that writers need and that classroom instructors are not able to offer. Instructors also commented on the usefulness of the handouts as resources for their teaching. We were particularly pleased with the many responses from faculty across campus whose students had come to the Lab and subsequently showed evident writing improvement because of the tutorial help. Students indicated that they valued the instruction, the tutors' ability to help them think and to find their own answers, the individual attention, the immediate feedback, and the friendly environment.

When departmental awards were instituted in the spring semester, we were not only pleased that so many nominations were made but also that the comments about the nominees expressed such strong praise for their work. Tutoring awards were announced both for graduate students who serve as Lab instructors and for peer tutors who work either with English 100 students or with resumes and business writing.

When evaluating self-instruction resources in the Writing Lab, the primary users of self-instruction— English 002 (ESL) and English 109 students— appreciated being able to use materials at their own pace and on their own schedule. The students learning English as a second language especially appreciated being able to spend as much time as they wanted listening to spoken English. When evaluating the microcomputer facilities, the users expressed appreciation to the English Department for providing computers to write essays and term papers for English 101 and 102 in a room where tutors were also accessible to talk about writing concerns. The availability of a computer consultant was also very important. Communications students made particular use of simulation software for journalism, and non-native students made heavy use of computer-assisted-instruction in grammar for ESL students.

An unusually large number of complaints from students and their teachers dealt with long waits and insufficient staffing. The addition of one more TA slot for next year will help to alleviate this problem, but it is likely that we will still have occasion to turn students away or ask that they spend time waiting to see a tutor. Complaints about the noise and overcrowding in Room 224 can only be resolved with more space, preferably expanding into Room 228 for self-instruction, as explained in last year's report. Computer users asked for more updated equipment and software, plus facilities equal to those available for Management majors, but such major purchasing requests are not likely to be funded in the near future. No other specific complaints were included on evaluation forms other than comments by one student and a lecturer that indicated disagreement between the teacher's assessment and the tutor's response to a student paper.

Future Directions

As we prepare for 1989-90, it is clear that the Lab has some on-going needs and new directions to explore. The need for individualized writing instruction is such that, although we will have an additional tutor next year, we will not be able to meet all students' needs. Additional space is a critical need, to alleviate crowding and noise and to provide for more instructional equipment and some storage facilities. We also continue to need a budget that will give us some ability to plan for purchases and for replacement of materials that are worn-out or lost. We would like to increase our word processing facilities for students and to provide them with laser printers for high quality printing of resumes and papers.

We hope that projects begun this year, computerizing our record keeping and offering non-credit courses for the community, will be expanded and developed. And we continue to need a public relations campaign that will overcome student misperceptions about the real function of a writing lab. Faculty across campus indicate a need to become more aware also of the Writing Lab and of appropriate ways to make use of it.

Finally, we need to continue to study the theory and practice of individualized instruction in order to provide our students with the best possible instruction in writing skills. We remain committed to our goal of having the Lab serve as a useful, effective, well-functioning tutorial service. And, once again, all of the Writing Lab staff offers our appreciation and thanks to Dr. Leon Gottfried for his continued strong support of the Writing Lab. His commitment to providing the best possible learning environments for students creates the framework within which the Writing Lab functions.

Attachment A: Statistical Tables

No. of appts. per student	No. of students	Total no. of appts.
1	713	713
2	178	356
3	83	249
4	52	208
5	26	130
6	19	114
7	9	63
8	7	56
9	6	54
10	4	40
11	6	66
12	3	36
14	1	14
15	3	45
	1110	2144

No. of sessions per student	No. of students	Total no. of sessions
1	1208	1208
2	283	566
3	109	327
4	71	284
5	51	255
6	22	132
7	18	126
8	13	104
9	14	126
10	9	90
11	9	99
12	11	132
13	3	39
14	3	42
15	5	75
16	2	32
17	1	17
18	3	54
23	1	23
24	1	24
29	1	29
	1838	3784

No. of requests per student	No. of students	Total no. of requests
1	97	97
2	25	50
3	11	33
4	7	28
5	2	10
6	3	18
7	3	21
8	4	32
9	1	9
10	2	20
12	1	12
20	1	20
21	1	21
22	1	22
24	1	24
	160	417

No. of requests	No. of students	Total no. of handouts
1	1829	1829
2	209	418
3	74	222
4	40	160
5	15	75
6	7	42
7	8	56
8	1	8
11	1	11
	2184	2821

No. of uses	No. of students	Total no. of uses
1	186	186
2	41	82
3	26	78
4	19	7
5	10	50
6	7	42
7	6	42
8	1	8
9	2	18
10	2	20
11	3	33
12	4	48
14	2	28
22	1	22
23	1	23
24	1	24
26	1	26
37	1	37
	314	843

No. of visits	No. of students	Total no. of uses
1	176	176
2	52	104
3	28	84
4	18	72
5	21	105
6	23	138
7	13	91
8	11	88
9	12	108
10	6	60
11	6	66
12	5	60
13	4	52
14	3	42
15	2	30
16	3	48
18	1	18
	384	1342

Attachment B

Summary of evaluations

A. From instructors (percentages based on 525 responses)

1. Students' writing improvement:
 - great improvement 35%
 - some improvement 59%
 - no improvement 6%

2. Students' grade improvement:
 - one letter grade or more 53%
 - up to one letter grade 32%
 - none or less than one letter grade 15%

3. Students' attitude toward the Lab:
 - appreciation 36%
 - little or no feeling expressed 63%
 - resentment 1%

4. Feedback from Lab instructors:
 - excellent 50%
 - adequate 49%
 - little or none 1%

5. Evaluation of Writing Lab services:
 - very helpful 69%
 - somewhat helpful 30%
 - not helpful 1%

6. Other comments: See page 10 for sample excerpts and page 11 for an unsolicited letter from a composition instructor.

B. From Students (Percentages based on 315 responses)

1. Quality of instruction:
 - very helpful and clear 76%
 - adequate 23%
 - not helpful or clear 1%

2. Writing progress:
 - great deal of progress 51%
 - some progress 45%
 - no progress 4%*

3. Grade improvement:
 - one letter or more 66%
 - up to one letter 22%
 - dropped or didn't change 12%*

4. Other comments: See pages 8-9 for sample excerpts.

*Some of these responses were from students who were working on resumes and therefore could not indicate progress and did not receive grades.

Comments from students

- Gave me a different perspective on my writing style. New insight. Good program, keep up the good work.
- Having more tutors in the lab would be more helpful.
- I liked very much the work done by my lab instructor: she was friendly and she did not correct my essay but actually made me think.
- Jackie was *very* good. She explained everything thoroughly and Wow! did it help.
- I liked the lab because the instructors helped me with focus. It helped clear my mind just having someone to talk to about my paper.
- It helps give me confidence. I like the caring and understanding the people show in helping you learn.
- There was no way to get an appointment unless you called at least a week in advance. If you came in for a drop-in you had to wait forever. I just don't have those hours to waste waiting. It is a good place, however, because my grades were better when I went there. The people were nice and helpful.
- Bonnie did an excellent job! She cleared up so many questions I had. She made sure I understood her explanations. She took me slowly step by step through instructions.
- I liked the attitude of the two tutors I had. Getting feedback from them was helpful. I disliked not being able to schedule more sessions.
- I benefit from the handouts. The tutoring given was very good. It didn't give me direct answers, but it made me think and go about writing my papers in a better manner.
- Took one paper I had from a C- to an A.
- The lab and its personnel have helped me *focus* my writing. This, I feel, was my weak point in writing.
- [The Writing Lab] is a good method to learn composition, especially for foreign students. Thanks English Department provides the service for us.
- I enjoyed the supportive and relaxing atmosphere. It made me feel much more comfortable about my writing and inspired me.
- Went from "D" on pretest to "A" on 1st re-try.
- I liked very much the help in the lab. I had great difficulty in scheduling an appt. I kept hearing "We're booked up" over and over. May be the writing lab can expand in the future to allow for more student visits.
- Possibly more assistance in the writing lab is needed. There were sometimes when I needed help but could not get it because I would have had to wait for a couple of hours.
- Tutor was very positive about my paper and this attitude put me at ease.
- The lab improved my grade and when revising for the final time, I feel that it improved a great deal. I liked them not telling me what to do, but asking my opinion.
- It helped me learn from mistakes, improve my writings. Also, helped me understand difficult concepts that I didn't understand in the classroom.

Comments from students (cont.)

- Helped me to expand on my ideas and develop them better and add more description and detail.
- The instructors in the lab *always* answer any questions *clearly*, and they *explain why* things are done in certain ways. This is very helpful in remembering how to do things (grammar, sentence structure) the correct way. The instructors act as though they generally care about asking questions.
- I liked the way you got personal attention.
- The writing lab is a great set-up.
- Make it bigger. More people to help students. Writing is too important to just have a small help service.
- I think the lab is a great resource for students who need help in their writing, or just for students who need advice w/their writing. Overall, the lab is definitely an advantage for the student.
- The writing lab instructors were very helpful. I was suffering from a mental block, and the lab (the people there) helped me over it.
- They talk on your level and really help you understand.
- I did get some needed assurance and some helpful ideas on brainstorming. She didn't do the brainstorming for me. She got me to do it which will be helpful in the future.
- It helped me quite a bit in my papers. The people helped me to see different ways of presenting my papers.
- It brought my grades up a great deal.
- I really thought it was beneficial. Students having access to a writing lab is a great idea.
- The lab is too crowded.
- The writing lab is a good way to help those students who have trouble writing and expressing their thoughts on paper. Without the writing lab I feel that my grade in English 101 would be below average.
- The lab was responsive to my specific questions and gave me good ideas for writing my paper.
- I liked the way the instructor related and spoke with me. She made me feel comfortable, and I was put in a nice atmosphere.
- The lab was very helpful. Maureen helped me very much with my papers, and what I should look for in editing a paper. Only problem is arranging an appointment.
- The handouts were the most useful. In the time I was in there I did learn a few things, but it didn't stick— looking back at the handouts helped on future assignments.
- More workers— there is definitely a shortage of help. I hope you'll consider hiring more people.
- It would be better if you didn't have to wait, there was more room, and more tutors. Everyone is kind, polite, and helpful and informative. Just needs more of everything!

Comments from teachers

- What an asset— invaluable resource center! There's no substitute for that one-on-one help and concern.
- I'm glad the lab is available and helping students— there is a need— a huge need— for the improvements which your services make possible. (Communication Dept. instructor)
- Feedback was very helpful. I am sure Pete was helped greatly. (Prof. D. Lybrook, Supervision)
- The lab is a very important tool that allows a student to seek help that is not available, generally, through a TA or instructor. Jesse's lab experience was a very positive experience for him.
- Our department needs to make more use of your facilities. (Prof. J. Jacob, EET)
- Drew's writing improved greatly after he began attending. He has written 3 "B" papers and 1 "C," while his one grade before he began attending was a low "C." His experience with the WL has been a very positive one. Thanks.
- I would like to see, based on past experiences, less waiting time for drop-in students.
- I think the people who work in the Lab are incredible.
- Candae was a good student when she began the class, & has improved even more. She really appreciated the writing lab.
- Scott's attitude toward the course and toward me improved 100% after his visits to the lab. Thank you.
- The kind of help afforded my students seemed to be excellent. I send them to the lab for all their revisions. They do well.
- I find (and I'm sure my students who take advantage of this service do) that the writing lab is not only tremendously helpful to them and to me in that the corrections that the writing lab accomplishes and explains make their papers easier to grade. (Prof. W. J. Palmer, English)
- On the whole the writing lab is extremely useful— however, it probably needs more space.
- My students used the lab consistently...I felt the guidance they received was excellent.
- The main problem that students experienced was not being able to get help when they needed it. Several reported that appointments had to be made several weeks in advance, and they became discouraged. I personally appreciated the handouts. When students are experiencing specific difficulties, an instructor does not always have time to make up a special study help.
- Helpful: handouts, tutoring, traveling teachers. I have *really* appreciated having the writing lab available.
- I continue to be impressed by the wide range of assistance you offer students.
- You have an extraordinary program here.

PURDUE
UNIVERSITY DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Mickey Harris and the Writing Lab Staff
Writing Lab
Heavilon Hall
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West Lafayette, IN 47906

Dear Mickey and the rest of the Lab staff:

In the spirit of the holiday season, let me make like Tiny Tim and exclaim GOD BLESS YOU ALL!

This semester, nobody and nobody's students used the lab more than I or my students did. Each student in my section of 101 visited the Lab at least five times to discuss papers with tutors, and each student in my two sections of 100 put in 20 to 25 hours of assorted types of Lab work. I used the computers and the books, journals, and handouts.

Usually, my students came to the Lab after peer tutoring and before seeing me in conference. Every time, the tutor isolated the paper's major problem and discussed it in detail, so I could just review the problem and discuss some other shortcoming the student had in the paper. To say that the Lab made my job easier is understatement, and I'd rather be known as the king of hyperbole: Hell, you guys saved my life and the lives of my students! (I have ten 100 students trying to exempt from 101 with my blessings, and it's the Lab that helped them get to that level of quality.)

What more can I say? You helped every one of my students. Yes, all of them benefited from the time they spent in the Lab. Not one got bad advice. Not one stayed the same. Even the ones I thought might be hopeless improved.

If I had my way, three ghosts of Writing Labs past, present, and future would visit the Scrooges who dare say Humbug to the work you do. Maybe then they'd change their ways and open their minds and/or their little black purses.

Thanks, from me and my 50+ students,

Tony Vallone

Tony



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