Purdue Writing Lab Report

1987-1988

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Writing Lab Report: 1987-88

Summary

As the statistics for 1987-88 indicate, this year the Purdue University Writing Lab served more students than ever before, and judging from the evaluations we've received, our effectiveness remained consistently high. The Lab helped over 8600 Purdue students improve their writing skills, and we answered over 400 grammar hotline calls from students, faculty, and staff at Purdue; from people in the community; and from callers across the country (including law firms, businesses, newspapers, and government offices).

We are particularly pleased to note the large increase in the number of students coming in both for extended tutorial appointments and briefer drop-in help and for instructional handouts, as well as the large increase in the number of faculty members who referred students to the Lab to work on writing assignments in a variety of courses across the campus.

Other noteworthy accomplishments for this year include hosting the Fourth Annual Peer Tutoring in Writing Conference in November, adding desktop publishing for educational purposes, and upgrading two of the Lab's three practicum courses in tutoring writing to two-credit, 300-level courses. In addition, a number of graduate student instructors and peer tutors in the Lab presented papers on individualized instruction in writing labs at regional and national conferences, and two lab instructors have been invited to present papers at writing lab conferences next year.

For the future, with the aid of funds from the HSSE Dean's Office, we can replace wornout self-instruction materials and look forward to offering more self-instruction in speaking, listening, and comprehension skills for students learning English as a second language. We also plan to explore ways to assist with writing skills throughout the university community.

This report discusses the Writing Lab's work in four sections: A. Staffing and Services, B. Statistics and Trends, C. Evaluations, and D. Future Directions. Included as attachments are statistical tables of Lab use and evaluations, plus a sampling of instructor and student comments from evaluation forms.

Staffing and Services

This year's Lab staff consisted of fourteen graduate teaching assistants and myself, plus an instructional assistant at the reception desk, a secretary, work/study assistance, 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 we offered tutorials, drop-in assistance, workshops, Traveling Teacher sessions (in composition 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 represent 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)

- Foreign students enrolled in courses in the English-as-a-second-language program (English 001,002, 100I, 101I, and 102I)

- Students in a variety of Communication Department courses, particularly Communication 114, 252 and 456

- 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 assigned by teachers in other departments and schools to get help with writing skills

- Students in three sections of a practicum course in tutoring writing (English 502W)

- Students seeking information about the Writing Lab for journalism assignments

- Students at both the graduate and undergraduate level seeking help with writing tasks that are not part of course assignments

- Graduate students in the English Department who are preparing to teach writing

- Composition teachers who need professional journals, books, and instructional materials on writing skills

- Purdue faculty who request assistance in adding writing skills to their courses

- Visitors who seek information and models for starting 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	1219	2192
No. of drop-in sessions	2531	3761
No. of uses of self-instruction modules	159	358
No. attending workshops	41	41
No. attending Traveling Teacher sessions	433	433
No. using the English 100 lab	410	1277
No. using the Lab's computers	448	1046

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No. using Lab resources (handouts, library, etc.)	2858	3587
No. of instructors using Lab resources	12	12
No. of students using the Lab as a writing room	508	850
No. of grammar hotline phone calls	469	469
No. attending conversation groups	2	2
Other	16	16
Total no. using the Writing Lab	9106	14,044

These statistics reveal some significant trends in Writing Lab services over the last year:

- **•Increase in tutorial instruction**
  There has been a 20% increase in the number of students coming in for tutorial appointments, with the most significant increases in the number of students from English 102, English 109, and English 420. In addition, there was an increase in the number of students from the Communication Department and courses in other departments and schools.

- **• Increase in drop-in sessions**
  There has been a 31% increase in the number of students dropping in for brief help, with the most significant increases in the number of students from English 002, English 102, English 102I, English 420, and other courses on campus. A new service added for the fall of this year was the Writing Lab Express, a service in which lab instructors spent some of their tutorial time at the Undergraduate Library during busier evening hours, to offer writers an opportunity to work with tutors while researching papers. This service contributed to the increase in drop-in sessions for the fall semester.

- **• Increased use by other courses**
  This year there was a major increase in the use of the Writing Lab by students writing papers for other courses. Faculty members from AGEC 451, AGEC 496, CDFS 211, CPT 152, COMM 456, CSR 431, and several education courses specifically requested that the Lab offer assistance with writing projects in those courses, in two cases for eighth-semester students about to enter the business world with writing skills that the instructors deemed inadequate. Personal letters and notes from most of the faculty at the end of the semester expressed appreciation for the help and for the noticeable improvement in their students' writing. In addition, the grammar hotline was used regularly by an instructor in pharmacy as she graded writing assignments and needed help in explaining writing problems she noted on papers.

- **• Increased use of the English 100 lab**
  As a result of a heavier emphasis on the use of peer tutors to assist English 100 students, there has been a 21% increase in the use of the English 100 lab. As the director of next year's English 100 program has indicated a strong preference for continuing and — if possible, increasing— the assistance of the Lab's peer tutors, there will be a need to increase the number of hours in which peer tutors are available.

- **• Increased use of computers**
  There has been a 29% increase in the use of the Writing Lab's three microcomputers, with the heaviest users being students from two sections of Comm. 252 using a journalism simu-

lation and English 100 students who were encouraged to explore the use of word processing to assist writing. In addition, 18 small group workshops on learning to word process increased the general use of the computers for this purpose.

- **Increased use of lab resources**
  A 56% increase in the number of students using lab resources is due mainly to an increased demand for instructional handouts to supplement writing texts and to assist students in other courses where no text on writing skills is normally used. On their evaluations instructors indicated that this was a service they found particularly helpful.

- **Decreased use of self-instruction**
  A 72% decline in the use of self-instruction materials is due primarily to reduced use of these materials in the ESL program. Since the evaluations by the students who use these materials are almost all very favorable, we hope to interest the ESL staff in making more extensive use of the materials next fall. A comprehensive index now being prepared will make it easier for teachers to be aware of what is available for their students.

- **Decreased use of Traveling Teacher sessions**
  A 69% decline in the Traveling Teacher service indicates our decreased emphasis in offering this to instructors in the composition program, though we continue to provide classroom sessions for instructors in other courses who have writing assignments and want the students to have some guidelines for writing. In addition, student groups and courses where students are preparing for job searches express their appreciation for sessions on resume writing.

- **Decreased use of resources by instructors**
  Due to an error in our record keeping program, we do not have accurate statistics for the number of instructors who used Writing Lab resources, particularly the handouts.

While the statistics indicate how the Writing Lab was used, they do not explain how the Writing Lab instructors spent their time. This year, lab instructors were asked to keep logs of hours spent on lab work in addition to their regularly scheduled appointment and drop-in time. An analysis of these logs indicates that the instructors regularly spent between two and three additional hours each week planning, scheduling, and presenting Traveling Teacher sessions; developing instructional materials and offering feedback on materials being written by others; meeting with classroom teachers to plan further tutorial work with their students; planning, scheduling, and advertising new services such as the Writing Lab Express; doing substitute reception work at the front desk; answering grammar hotline calls; completing paperwork connected with tutoring; mentoring and talking with peer tutors; staying overtime for extra tutoring when the lab was particularly busy; writing memos and information packets for particular programs, such as English 420 and ESL; preparing presentations for staff meetings; offering lab tours, and answering questions for classroom instructors.

Evaluations

As in past evaluations, teachers and students 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 evaluation questionnaires sent out both at the end of the Fall 1987 and Spring 1988 semesters are presented in Attachment B (page 7). In addition to these ratings, a sampling of comments by both students and their instructors is also included on pages 8-10. We are particularly pleased not only with the high ratings but also with the particularly high rate of return of these forms this year.

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. Students indicated that while they value the instruction, the Lab's ability to provide motivation, individual attention, immediate feedback, support, and a friendly environment was also very important to them.

Specific complaints from students and their teachers dealt mainly with long waits and insufficient staff. Adding more staff would alleviate this problem. Complaints about the noise and overcrowding of the facilities in Room 224 are inevitable given the many functions of that room which include the English 100 lab, computers, the secretary's office, and self-instruction carrels for cassette tapes. Thus responding to requests from ESL students for listening carrels in that room is not presently possible. The long-term solution here would be to have the Office of Writing Review move from Room 228 to Room 229 (as they have requested) and turn Room 228 into a self-instruction room with special facilities for ESL students. The advantages of having Room 228 are that the added space would permit the purchase of more appropriate equipment for ESL study, would be monitored by the Lab's receptionist, and would provide immediate access to the Lab's other materials and tutors.

Future Directions

As we prepare for 1988-89, it is clear that the Lab has some on-going needs and new directions to explore. As in the past, we continue to need to offer more tutorial hours of instruction. The addition of one or more lab instructors would eliminate the overcrowding and long waits that too many students complain of, and the English 100 lab will need a minimum of an extra five hours/week of peer tutoring. In addition, there is a continuing need for some kind of budget as the present system permits no planning for long term needs.

Among the new projects presently being worked on is the completion of a comprehensive index and referral system for ESL materials. With funds provided last year from the Dean of Academic Services for desktop publishing, we can work on further upgrading of the *Writing Lab Newsletter* so that it will be more professionally printed and on restructuring many of the Lab's handouts to enhance their instructional effectiveness through more appropriate visual presentation. As the peer tutor program grows, we will need to provide more extensive supervision and contact with these students. In addition, we look forward to having two sections of the peer tutor training practicum, English 502W, switch to a two-credit course, English 390. With funds already allocated from the Office of the Dean of HSSE we will have more self-instruction and reference materials for ESL students, replacements for some of the more worn self-instruction tapes and booklets, and some more appropriate furniture for the tutorial setting.

The most promising new challenge will be to explore more effective ways to work with Purdue faculty who request Writing Lab assistance with writing skills in their courses. This interest coincides with a national trend toward stressing writing in content courses and provides another way that the Lab can serve the University community.

As the Writing Lab staff looks forward to the coming year, 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 members offer 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

Table 1. No. of tutorial appts.

No. of appts. per student	No. of students	Total no. of appts.
1	833	833
2	173	346
3	82	246
4	55	220
5	25	125
6	22	132
7	6	42
8	2	16
9	5	45
10	4	40
11	5	55
12	3	36
13	3	36
	1219	2192

Table 2. No. of drop-in sessions

No. of sessions per student	No. of students	Total no. of sessions
1	1853	1853
2	410	820
3	138	414
4	65	260
5	29	145
6	17	102
7	7	49
8	4	32
9	2	18
10	3	30
11	1	11
12	1	12
15	1	15
	2531	3761

Table 3. No. of self-instruction modules used

No. of modules	No. of students	No. of uses of modules
1	105	105
2	21	42
3	10	30
4	10	40
5	5	25
6	1	6
7	2	14
9	1	9
10	2	20
32	1	32
35	1	35
	159	358

Table 4. No. of student requests for handouts

No. of requests	No. of students	Total no. of handouts
1	2383	2383
2	363	726
3	76	228
4	15	60
5	11	55
6	2	12
7	3	21
8	1	8
10	1	10
13	1	13
15	1	15
56	1	56
	2858	3587

Table 5. No. of students using the lab as a writing room

No. of uses	No. of students	Total no. of uses
1	371	371
2	56	112
3	30	90
4	19	76
5	15	75
6	6	36
7	5	35
8	4	32
9	1	9
14	1	14
	508	850

Table 6. No. of students using the English 100 lab

No. of visits	No. of students	Total no. of uses
1	194	194
2	54	108
3	44	132
4	23	92
5	18	90
6	25	150
7	16	112
8	4	32
9	9	81
10	7	70
11	3	33
12	4	48
13	1	13
14	3	42
15	2	30
16	2	32
18	1	18
	410	1277

Table 7. Uses of computer

No. of uses	No. of students	Total no. uses
1	280	280
2	65	130
3	31	93
4	17	68
5	10	50
6	9	54
7	9	63
8	9	72
9	3	27
10	2	20
11	3	33
12	2	24
13	3	39
14	1	14
18	1	18
20	2	40
21	1	21
	448	1046

Summary of evaluations

A. From Instructors

    1. Students' writing improvement:
•great improvement	40%
•some improvement	56%
•no improvement	4%

    2. Students' grade improvement:
•one letter grade or more	61%
•up to one letter grade	30%
•none or less than one letter grade	8%

    3. Students' attitude toward the lab:
•appreciation	40%
•little or no feeling expressed	59%
•resentment	1%

    4. Feedback from Lab instructors:
•excellent	68%
•adequate	32%
•little or none	0%

    5. Evaluation of Writing Lab services:
•very helpful	85%
•somewhat helpful	14%
•not helpful	1%

    6. Other comments: See page 10 for sample excerpts.

B. From Students

    1. Quality of instruction:
•very helpful and clear	81%
•adequate	18%
•not helpful or clear	1%

    2. Writing progress:
•great deal of progress	46%
•some progress	52%
•no progress	2%

    3. Grade improvement:
•one letter or more	68%
•up to one letter	25%
•dropped or didn't change	7%

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

Comments from students

•The lab gave me some new insights and ideas. Talking out loud to a tutor helped me sort my organizational ideas and get some feedback from the tutor.

•Direction, focus, and theme have been achieved through my use of this writing lab. I do hesitate quite often to come here because of lack of help or time slots on a minute's notice. Outstanding job— keep it up! Thanks!

•I thought it was very helpful with my assignment. The only improvement that I might suggest is that an effort be made to decrease waiting time. Thank you.

•Warren and Jana were both a great help in the lab. They started with help, then would give me time to re-write and check on my progress. Up to this point I have A's and I feel they've helped me achieve this grade. The lab was great! Very "positive" people!

•There was a long wait.

•I think the writing lab was very helpful in getting another objective view with my writing. The people gave me new ideas on how to organize papers and help on word choice and order.

•I used it early in the semester. It helped to raise my grades. I learned to organize and write better overall.

•Need better hours. I was turned down twice when trying to make an appointment.

•A few times I had to wait a while or schedule an appointment for a later date. But everyone that helped me at the lab really tried to help me and gave me some good ideas.

•Not only did Mari Jo help me to get a good grade (64 out of 64) on my application letter, more importantly, this help led to an interview (which went well) with the large accounting firm to whom the letter was addressed. My highest praise goes out to your instructor, Mari Jo, for her pleasant and enthusiastic instruction.

•I think the lab offers what I call a "trained" extension of peer editing. This experience gives writers alternative perspectives to writing. The more input of information from the lab person, the more resources the student has to better analyze, evaluate, and choose the best approach.

•There are not enough instructors in the Writing Lab because it's always hard to get an appointment. However, I really appreciate the help from the Writing Lab's instructors especially for the international students like me, to improve our writing skills.

•It helped me to better organize my paper and my thoughts.

•I think the lab was a little under-staffed. But this is probably a problem that you already know about.

•Writing lab work definitely helped me. My usual class and working schedule prohibited me from making more appointments and there were little drop-in time or more quick tutorial help available to us. We need more quick service.

•The lab is a beneficial service to students. Keep up the good work.

•The lab has helped me to clarify much of my doubts regarding the grammar and formulating sentences.

•You could try getting more 101 tutors. Sometimes you couldn't have walk-in appt.

•I liked the help that Rick gave and his suggestions helped me get a job.

•The lab was a great help to me. My tutor seemed genuinely concerned with my understanding of my paper and my mistakes. He took time with me that was greatly needed for which I fully appreciate the progress I made.

•The lab was helpful. I especially liked the handouts. It was nice to have personal one on one help.

•The handouts help make the explanation of the instructor more valuable.

•Kim, I got an A.

•It really helped a lot in how I saw my paper. It gave me focus.

•Helped me organize ideas on paper and clearly back up thesis with evidence. Learned difference between persuasion and informative papers.

•My grammar is very poor. The Writing Lab helped me find many errors in my writing. This helped in the overall grades of my papers.

•I think the writing lab is great. It is really handy to use and easy.

•The lab helped me mostly with my punct. I also received help with sentence structure. I feel the writing lab is helpful for students. The only I could suggest for improvement are more instructors in the lab.

•The lab at first is intimidating; however, the people are cool. Ben helped me a great deal. He's easy to talk to and doesn't make me feel stupid.

•I liked the one on one help they gave. Any question you had an instructor would individually help you. I think that helps very much.

•Writing Lab enabled me to plan for assignments better.

•The only thing that I didn't like was it could get so crowded at times. Other than that, the writing lab was good for me and I intend to use it in the future.

•I like the tutors and people was very nice to me whenever I went over there. The number of tutors is short I think and should be increased.

•The lab has helped to clarify topics and focus on them much better. The help given there is very helpful to the learning process. The use of suggestions and letting the student guide the tutoring session help the student to learn much.

•The lab is a great help and probably should become a mandatory part of some classes.

•The handouts were just an assignment, but the help I got from Mickey was great. My grades went from Ds to Bs because of the help I received.

•I am very glad there is a service such as this available. It is extremely helpful. Thanks!

Comments from teachers

- I really noticed improvement from this student, and a lot of enthusiasm about the lab.

- I have, as a teacher, eternal gratitude for the individualized instruction— a support net. THANKS to all of you!

- When I stopped in to observe tutorials, the [peer] tutors were giving advice that was bordering on ideal.

- Great job with my students.

- As always, I've been very pleased with the help my students have received from the lab, so my only comments are "congratulations on fine work" and "thanks."

- Tutoring and handouts are the tools my students use most often. In addition, I have some favorite handouts from your files. I duplicate and use these regularly.

- I used the instructor handout file frequently. Perhaps you could use more staff. Several times students made appointments to discuss particular papers and couldn't get in for two weeks (the walk-in times were long too).

- A success story! Went from D papers to a B for the course! I'm sure you helped her a great deal and helped her develop an awareness of standards. Her confidence about writing improved 100%.

- Thanks you for having the computers open for student use. They were very helpful.

- My students enjoyed working in the Lab. Some of them showed tremendous improvement. I just wanted to thank the tutors at the Lab for helping me and my students.

- You need more tutors and a larger work area.

- Rob has been coming to the WL regularly for 2 semesters now. His writing has advanced from D to C+ B- quality.

- Would appreciate it if my students didn't have to wait too long for help.

- The handouts have provided a wealth of information for my classes. Thank you!

- I find the lab especially helpful when students in 200 and 300 lit classes have trouble organizing, developing, documenting in a paper. Many thanks for your work. (Prof. Leslie Field, English)

- You provide a great service. Keep up the good work. (Prof. James Russell, Education)

- The services you offer to students of all ages are invaluable to this university. I am so glad that the Writing Lab exists for students. (Peggy Sullivan, Asst. Dean of Students)

- I am encouraged that a sizable number of the students have made use of the lab and have improved their skills. (Prof. Richard Feinberg, CSR)

- Student received "A" on paper. Was one of 2-3 best in class of 50. Obviously your services were very helpful. (Prof. Robert May, History)