

WRITING LAB REPORT  
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Muriel Harris  
Linda Calendrillo  
William Demaree  
Nell Gillis

## SUMMARY

The English Department's Writing Lab, reorganized and enlarged during the summer of 1975, presently shares its new facilities in Room 226, Heavilon Hall, with the HSSE Learning Center. The Writing Lab and Learning Center now provide, through their combined services, a logically unified and easily accessible center for helping students. At the reception desk here, in a building used heavily by students throughout the university, a student experiencing academic difficulties can arrange for individualized supplementary instruction in the basic skills of writing and reading, as well as tutorial help for a wide range of other university courses.

The Writing Lab offers tutorial instruction in the grammar and mechanics needed by students with writing problems. Individualized plans of study, based on a diagnosis of the student's writing, are drawn up by lab instructors for each student who attends the lab. After tutorial instruction in a unit of grammar, the student progresses to exercises and then writing practice sheets to help him master that particular unit of grammar before progressing to the next area.

In the Fall, 1975 semester, 238 students received this type of tutorial instruction from the Writing Lab staff, who are all experienced teachers of composition. The majority of the students who attended the lab (81%) needed short term help, ranging from one to four appointments while others who needed extensive instruction reported to the lab for weekly half-hour appointments during the

major portion of the semester. Although the lab is available to all students in the university, approximately 91% of the students who attended the lab were referred there by their composition teachers or came in on their own seeking help with composition course writing. The remainder of the students in the lab sought supplementary instruction because of writing problems which were interfering with educational achievement in other fields of study.

Questionnaires aimed at evaluating the progress made by students who attended the lab were sent to the students and to their composition instructors. From the questionnaires returned by the composition staff, the lab has found that 87% of these students who worked in the lab showed definite improvement in their mastery of writing skills, and the grades for 2/3 of the students who were evaluated on the questionnaire rose either one or two letter grades. Since the lab staff has also been constantly aware of the need to offer support and encouragement to students experiencing writing difficulties, the lab was gratified to find that instructors evaluated 64% of their students who attended the lab as having shown noticeable improvement in their confidence in themselves and their abilities, and 84% of the students working in the lab exhibited increased motivation to write well. Of the students who returned the evaluation questionnaire, all rated the quality of the lab instruction they received as adequate or better, with 93% rating the instruction as clear and effective; 97% of these students felt that they had made genuine progress in their writing as a result of their lab work. All the students evaluated the quality of the instructor's help as

adequate or better, with 95% reporting that their lab instructors were very helpful and competent.

These evaluation statistics, plus the exceedingly large increase (376%) in the number of students working in the lab in the Fall, 1975 semester, indicate that there is not only an extensive need for a laboratory to supplement the regular composition program in English, but that the tutorial instruction being provided has increased the writing competence, grades, motivation, and self confidence of the students who have been served by the lab.

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## A. STRUCTURE OF THE WRITING LAB

### 1. Coordination with the Office of Writing Review

The English Department's Writing Lab, having been reorganized in the summer of 1975, has found its coordination with the Office of Writing Review to be highly beneficial. Although a permanent coordinator for the Writing Lab is proposed for next year, the lab's very pressing and immediate need for a full-time staff member to guide its operation (as stated in the Writing Lab's report of May, 1975) was met by having Professor Thomas Gaston of the Office of Writing Review as its senior director. The lab staff was able to profit from his knowledge of the theory and practical aspects of teaching writing skills; to use resources available in his office, such as filmstrips, references, and books on language and composition skills; to attend his weekly staff meetings; and to adopt the categories for grammar and mechanics in the rating scale used by his office as an organizational structure for lab materials.

The staffs of the Writing Lab and Office of Writing Review have also begun to coordinate the evaluation and tutorial services of the English Department's composition program. The lab, having taken on, this semester, some of the supplementary instruction given by the Office of Writing Review staff to graduate students, should work toward assuming more of this tutorial work in the future. Although located in physically separate but adjoining facilities, the staff of both offices have established a good working relationship and look

forward to even closer coordination in future semesters.

## 2. Coordination with the HSSE Learning Center

The Writing Lab and Learning Center, which now share the facilities of Room 226 Heavilon Hall, provide through their combined services, a logically unified and easily accessible center for helping students. At the reception desk in this room, a student experiencing academic difficulties can arrange for supplementary instruction in the basic skills of reading and writing, as well as tutorial help for a wide range of other courses.

The Writing Lab has benefited from joining with the Learning Center by gaining the services of the Learning Center coordinators, Margaret Leonard and Molly Walbaum, and their work-study students who have staffed the reception desk every day, from approximately 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. While the services of the coordinators have been invaluable, the help provided by the work-study students has been more limited. The frequent rotation during the day of the work-study students who assist at the desk has resulted in a lack of continuity and an inability to maintain consistent reception procedures. However, despite the fragmentation of the reception staff's work, the lab has profited greatly from having someone at the reception desk all day to handle appointment-making procedures, answer phones, and direct incoming students to their instructors. Lab staff members thus did not have to interrupt their tutorial sessions to attend to these matters, and students were able to make appointments during the hours when no lab instructor was present.

Some clerical assistance was also available through the Learning Center, one morning each week, though a very large portion of the necessary typing and clerical work was shared among the lab staff, the Office of Writing Review secretary, and the English Department's secretaries in the main office. Also, both before and after the fall semester, a great deal of clerical help was needed when the Learning Center's secretary was unavailable. The extensive preparation of new forms, additional instructional materials, announcements, etc. that are presently being prepared for the spring semester are being handled by the English Department's secretaries and the lab staff.

The Writing Lab members have found that, in addition to being able to work with the Learning Center coordinators, the other great asset in the new joint facilities was the easy referral of lab students both to the Learning Center's tutors and to the reading specialist, Judy Best. The large increase in the number of students served by the Learning Center this fall can be attributed partly to its own natural growth, partly to its being located in Heavilon Hall which is heavily used by freshmen throughout the university, and partly to a large number of direct referrals by the Writing Lab staff. Lab members were also able to work closely with the Learning Center's reading specialist to uncover related reading problems experienced by some of the students in the lab. Mrs. Best worked with some of these students, but when her schedule rapidly became overloaded, the number of lab referrals had to be limited.

The Writing Lab and Learning Center staffs found that working together in the same room also offered both facilities the additional

space needed for larger numbers of students. However, since both facilities have grown so much this semester, students in Room 226 during particularly busy hours were occasionally unable to find chairs or table space at which to work. Despite the occasional chaos, both staffs have worked together to keep the room a warm and friendly, yet professional facility where students can receive not only the instructional help they require but also support and encouragement.

### 3. Record Keeping System

When preparing for the fall semester, the Writing Lab staff recognized that one of its prime needs was to organize systematic record keeping procedures. A file of notices was developed during the summer and put into use in the fall semester which informed instructors of their students' first appointments in the lab, monthly progress, and missed appointments. Samples of these notices are included in Appendix #1. This system of communication with the instructors proved to be highly effective and resulted in some instructors coming in to check their students' folders or to discuss their progress. On the evaluation questionnaires sent to instructors at the end of the semester (discussed in Section C, #2), 74% of the instructors who returned the questionnaires rated the feedback from the lab as adequate to excellent.

Once a student began attending the lab, a folder of his work was kept on file which included a Study Plan sheet itemizing all the particular areas of grammar that the student would be working on, with spaces for indicating the completion of each area as the student progressed through the various stages of instruction. The other record

of the student's progress, kept simultaneously by the lab instructor, was a Lab Instructor's Evaluation and Record sheet which contained a summary of what was accomplished at every meeting. A sample Study Plan and Lab Instructor's Evaluation and Record sheet are included in Appendix #1. Each student's folder also contained writing samples (used to diagnose his specific deficiencies in grammar), exercises, writing practice sheets, and the student's evaluation of the help offered at each lab session. The contents of these folders provided a detailed review of the student's work and was available for all composition instructors who wished to follow their students' progress in the lab.

#### 4. Instructional Approaches

The purpose of the Writing Lab is to supplement the work in the composition courses by offering instruction in the conventions of standard English to students who require additional help to improve their language skills. The lab instructor not only explains the principles which apply but also works with the student in tutorial sessions until he has demonstrated his ability to apply this knowledge in his own writing. The lab works primarily with problems in spelling, punctuation, sentence structure, usage, and diction, although some help is also offered with paragraph construction, topic limitation and development, revision, and conciseness.

In addition to multiple copies of five grammar texts, a set of self-instruction cards, and two tape recorders purchased by the English Department during the summer of 1975, the lab also has a fairly adequate library of texts acquired over the last several years of the lab's existence. Although these materials are used as effective

supplementary readings by the students, lab instructors rely primarily on verbal instruction supplemented by the handout or review sheets for each unit of grammar, with accompanying exercises. These handouts and exercises were developed by lab members last summer. A categorized check list of the major units of grammar and sample handouts for one unit of punctuation, with accompanying exercises and a sample writing practice sheet, are included in Appendix #2.

Lab instructors begin their work with each student by drawing up an individualized Study Plan based on the composition instructor's suggestions and the lab member's own diagnosis of a sample of the student's writing, in order to determine the frequency and extent of the student's difficulties with each area of grammar. Every unit on the Study Plan is worked on separately until mastered by the student before he progresses to the next unit.

Lab instruction, which begins with an explanation of the principle or needed rule, is often supplemented with the student's reading of individualized study cards or other materials available in the lab. The student is then given a handout, or review sheet summarizing the particular point of grammar, to keep as a reference sheet in his notebook. Thus, by the end of each student's lab work, he has in his notebook a set of review sheets for his particular needs.

After the explanation stage, the student progresses to exercises which require recognition and application of the principle, and by repeated use of this rule, the student begins to establish correct habits of use. The third step leads the student into transferring the rule being studied to his own writing, for he is asked to do a writing

practice sheet in which he writes a few paragraphs (ten to fifteen sentences) consciously constructing sentences which use the grammatical principle that was being studied. After having gone through these three stages of explanation, exercise, and writing practice for a specific area of grammar, the student then begins the next unit in his Study Plan.

Although supplementary self-instructional materials were used this semester, each student spent the majority of his lab time working personally with his instructor who offered-along with the instruction-support, encouragement, and a sympathetic ear. Lab staff members also attempted to be aware and possibly assist a student with related problems affecting his general academic performance. As will be seen in the tabulated responses to the evaluation questionnaire in Section C, #2, lab work helped a great majority of the students attending the lab not only to acquire subject mastery of grammar and to improve their grades, but also to improve their self confidence and motivation to write well.

#### B. PUBLICITY

Although the Writing Lab had already been in existence for several years, the lab wanted students and teachers of composition to be aware of its newly reorganized facilities and the types of help offered through the Learning Center. Publicity included:

1. Announcements, before the fall semester began, at the meeting for new instructors in composition, at the general meeting for all composition instructors, and

at the English 100 workshop.

2. Distribution of over 3,000 wallet cards reminders to those students in English 100, 101, 102, 420, and 421 who would be interested in using the lab.
3. Memos to all instructors of composition which summarized the lab's purpose, procedures, and schedule of hours.
4. Invitations to composition instructors to have lab members visit their classes and explain the lab's function, which resulted in speaking briefly to students in over eighty sections of English 100, 101, and 102.
5. An article in the Lafayette Journal and Courier and two articles in the Purdue Exponent.

### C. STATISTICAL SUMMARY OF RESULTS

#### 1. Total Number of Students Served by the Lab

As a result of the publicity given the lab, thirty-eight students began attending the lab during the second full week of classes, and by the third full week, the lab's appointment schedule was filled and remained so until the last day of classes. This was a major improvement in utilization of the lab over the previous spring semester when lab instructors saw few if any students during the early or late weeks of the semester.

By mid-September, when it became apparent that students in need of lab instruction were required to wait more than two weeks for their first appointments, lab instructors began working with two students during each half-hour session, to alleviate the waiting period.

At mid-semester, in response to instructors' complaints (including a petition from the English 100 staff requesting more lab instructors), lab members attempted to work with three students during each half-hour session, although this decreased the quality of instruction and did not noticeably relieve the overcrowding or reduce the waiting period. It is hoped that the additional staff being provided by the English Department for the Spring, 1976 semester will help to reduce the overcrowding and will allow students to begin their lab work sooner.

The final figures for the use of the lab during the Fall, 1975 semester are as follows:

Total no. of students attending the lab: 238

Total no. of individual appointments in the  
lab: 783

Record keeping in the lab for the Spring 1975 semester was done on an informal basis, with folders kept for thirty-eight students. It is the lab's best estimate that perhaps fifty students worked in the lab during the Spring, 1975 semester. Thus, the figures for this semester represent a 376% increase in the number of students attending the lab, although there was no increase in staff. The Learning Center coordinators report that over 170 students were served through their facilities this semester, a substantial increase over previous semesters. The Learning Center's reading specialist, Judy Best, reports an approximate 30% increase in the number of students with whom she worked.

Of the total of 238 students who received instruction in the Writing Lab, 115 (or 48%) were able to complete their Study Plan; 58 (or 24%) were unable to finish instruction before the semester ended, and

53 students (or 22%) ceased to attend the lab before they completed their work there. Since sixty-one additional students who had signed up for lab appointments never come in for their first lab session, this indicates a serious problem which must be corrected. Some of these students had withdrawn from the university (or had dropped their composition courses), but others may have either forgotten their appointments or lost the incentive or sense of need which first prompted them to make lab appointments. Several new methods of retaining more of these students are being considered for use during the Spring, 1976 semester.

Of the students who attended the lab, 81% needed short term help, ranging from one to four lab sessions, while others returned for weekly help throughout the semester. A table which itemizes the extent to which each student used the lab is as follows:

TABLE 1: Number of appointments required by various students attending the Writing Lab

<u>No. of Appointments</u>	<u>No. of Students</u>
1	73
2	51
3	41
4	28
5	18
6	6
7	7
8	10
10	2
17	1
22	1
23	1

Of the students attending the lab, 91% were referred there, or came on their own initiative, from composition courses. A table which indicates this is as follows:

TABLE 2: Number of students from various composition and other courses who required help with writing skills

<u>Course Number</u>	<u>Number of Students</u>
1. Composition Courses:	
English 002 .....	1
English 100 .....	40
English 101 .....	139
English 102 .....	14
English 103 .....	2
English 420 .....	1
English 421 .....	5
2. Other Courses:	
English 386 .....	1
English 493 .....	7
French Courses .....	3
Comm. 114 .....	1
English Education .....	1
Science .....	1
3. Graduate Students Preparing for English Proficiency Exam .....	
	7

In addition, lab records indicate that sixty-nine instructors of composition (which represents over half of the total composition staff) referred their students to the Writing Lab, which represents a significant increase over previous semesters in the use of the lab by composition instructors.

## 2. Evaluation of Students' Progress

In order to assess the quality of instruction received by students attending the Writing Lab and the degree of increased competence in these students' writing skills, the Writing Lab sent out seven-item evaluation questionnaires to the composition instructors for each of their students who attended the lab and a similar four-item questionnaire to the students. Although the lab staff would have preferred a higher rate of return, 95 of the questionnaires were returned by instructors and 57 by students.

A tally of the responses on the instructors' evaluation sheets indicates that while 6% of the students evaluated needed little help from the lab, the remaining 94% were in need of either some help or a great deal of help. Responses to the question concerning subject mastery indicate that 87% of the students demonstrated definite improvement in the areas of grammar studied in the lab, and the grades for 67% rose either one or two letter grades. Since one instructor commented on the questionnaire that she graded her students progressively harder through the semester, the grades for her students in the lab did not rise. This may have been true for other students as well. While 46% of the students indicated to their instructors that they appreciated the lab help, 8% expressed some resentment toward the lab, and the remaining 46% expressed no feeling to their instructors. Instructors of composition also reported that 36% of the students attending the lab exhibited no change in their self confidence, while 64% showed noticeable improvement in their confidence in themselves and

their abilities. Of the students evaluated for motivation, 84% indicated an increased desire to write well. Finally, 26% of the composition instructors rated feedback from the lab as less than adequate, while the remaining 74% evaluated communication from the lab as adequate to excellent.

When students evaluated the lab, all rated the quality of their instruction as adequate or better, with 93% rating the instruction as clear and effective. Of the students who returned the questionnaire, 97% felt that they had made progress in their writing as a result of their lab work, and 83% of these students reported that what they learned in the Writing Lab enabled them to write better papers in composition classes and to have their grades raised one to two letters. All the students evaluated the quality of their instructors' help as adequate or better, with 95% reporting that their lab instructors were very helpful and competent.

On the following pages are sample copies of the questionnaires sent to the instructors and the students, and enclosed in circles above each line are the total number of responses given for that point on the scale.

TO: \_\_\_\_\_, Composition instructor

FROM: \_\_\_\_\_, Writing Lab instructor

\_\_\_\_\_, a student in your composition course,  
has been working in the Writing Lab on the following units of instruction:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the Writing Lab's tutorial instruction, we would very much appreciate your answers to the following questions. Please circle the appropriate numbers unless you feel that they don't apply, and return this sheet to the box in the main office by the last day of classes this semester.

1. EXTENT OF HELP NEEDED: This student needed

(2)                      (4)                      (24)                      (32)                      (34)

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

very little help                      some help                      a great deal  
of help

2. SUBJECT MASTERY: For the above listed units of GRAMMAR, this student now generally demonstrates

(0)                      (12)                      (37)                      (28)                      (17)

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

no improvement                      some improvement                      great improvement

3. GRADE IMPROVEMENT: During the course of the semester, this student's grades

(7)                      (23)                      (43)                      (10)                      (9)

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

dropped or did not change                      Rose one letter grade                      Rose at least two letter grades

4. STUDENT'S ATTITUDE: While attending the lab, this student expressed the following feelings toward the lab

(3)                      (4)                      (41)                      (28)                      (13)

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

resentment                      no feeling expressed                      a great deal of appreciation

5. SELF IMAGE: This student's sense of self confidence in himself and his abilities seems to show

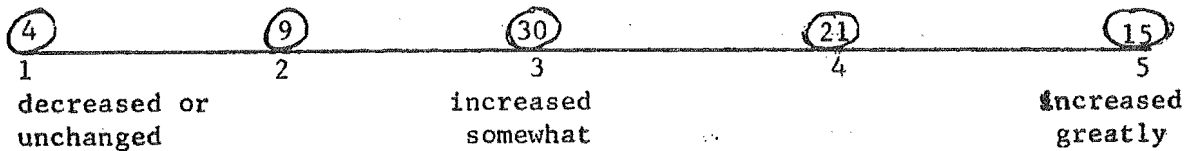
(0)                      (1)                      (33)                      (37)                      (20)

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

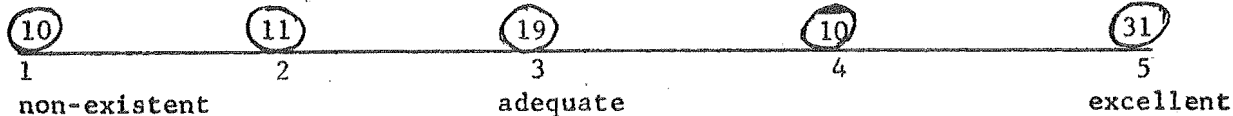
Decreased Self confidence                      No change                      Definite Improvement

(OVER)

6. MOTIVATION: This student's desire to write well seems:



7. FEEDBACK FROM THE LAB: While this student was attending the lab, communication from his lab instructor was



Other comments and suggestions:

No. of responses.

- 6 - Lab work helpful to the student's writing.
- 6 - Lab work helpful to the student's self confidence.
- 5 - Student periodically relapses and reveals original deficiencies.
- 4 - Instructor wants the student to continue in the lab next semester.
- 3 - Student had to wait too long to receive lab instruction.
- 3 - Student given insufficient help because of overcrowding in the lab.
- 3 - Student's improvement in writing hindered by physiological problems.
- 3 - Instructor unable to comment on improvement because the student dropped the course.
- 2 - Instructor didn't know whether the student's improvement was due to his lab work or composition course.
- 2 - Instructor complained of lack of communication from the lab.
- 2 - Instructor praised lab communication as excellent.
- 1 - Lab work improved the student's ability to profit from help.
- 1 - Not enough transfer of correct writing habits from paper to paper.
- 1 - Disappointment that student did not improve.

"It seems that grammar consciousness raising was his main need. I wish only that content could have kept up with mechanical awareness"

"I do feel you did a commendable job here. Thank you."

"You've truly helped to make (this student) bloom! I'm so proud of his development this fall."

"Thanks for all the help with various students."

"His improvement over his first papers has been dramatic."

"The Writing Lab is the GREATEST!"

"Considering the seriousness of the original problem, I think you did a pretty good job."

"Thank you all."

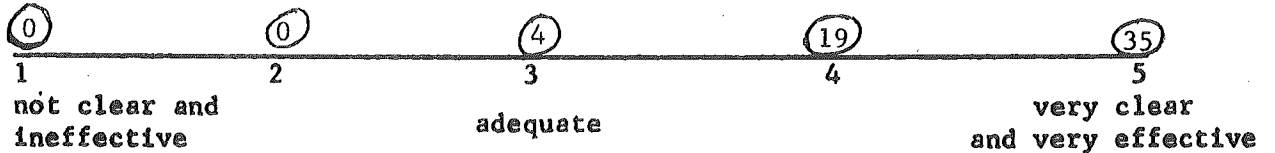
"I've been grading progressively harder throughout the semester, so don't be discouraged if the grade doesn't reflect improvement. Overall, I think the lab has done an excellent job."

"Thanks for all the help."

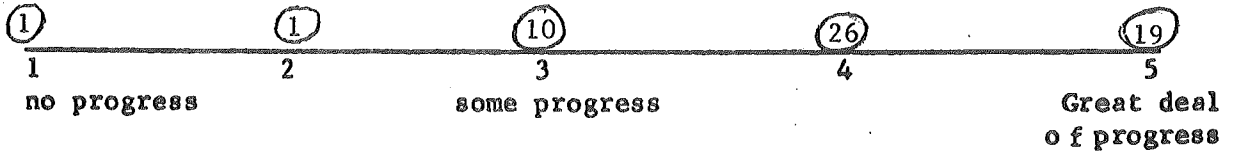
"In the short time remaining this semester, you'll probably accomplish more than I've been able to all semester."

The Writing Lab staff would very much appreciate your evaluation of the instruction you received this semester in the lab. Would you please circle the appropriate number in each question and return this sheet to the box at the receptionist's desk in the Writing Lab (226 HH) before the last day of class this semester. Thanks for your help.

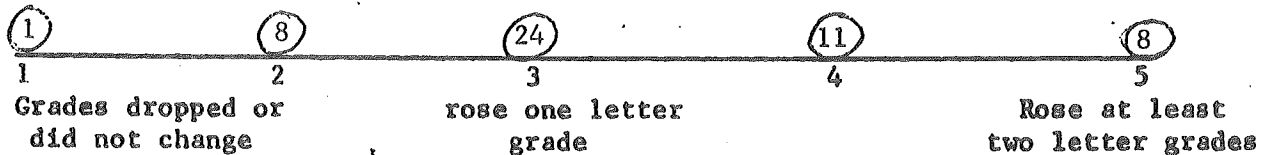
1. QUALITY OF INSTRUCTION: Do you feel that the materials and instruction you received in the lab were appropriate, clear, and effectively presented?



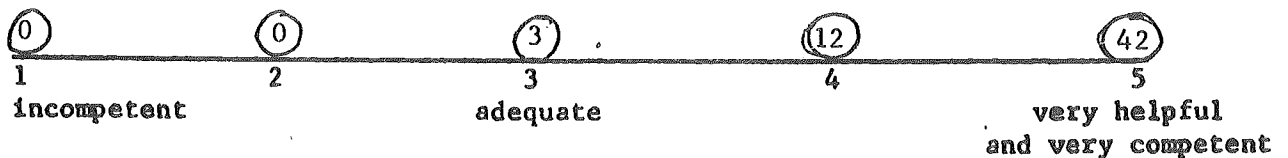
2. WRITING PROGRESS: Do you feel that you made genuine progress in your writing as a result of your lab work?



3. GRADE IMPROVEMENT: Do you feel that what you learned in the Writing Lab enabled you to write better papers in your composition class and therefore receive better grades?



4. QUALITY OF INSTRUCTOR: Do you feel that the instructor you worked with in the Writing Lab was genuinely helpful and competent?



Other comments and suggestions:  
No. of responses.

- 7 - Requests for more instructors.
- 3 - Lab work helped with writing and spelling.
- 3 - Requests to have the lab help with organization and style, as well as grammar.
- 2 - Lab instruction gave the student self confidence
- 2 - Requests for longer lab sessions.
- 2 - Requests for more difficult exercise sheets.
- 1 - Complaint about cancelled appointments and insufficient help.
- 1 - Request for lab sessions twice a week.
- 1 - Desire to continue lab work next semester.
- 1 - Student's busy schedule didn't permit him to do more work in the lab.
- 1 - Lab work gave the student better understanding of English.

"I wish other schools at Purdue had a set up like the English Department has to help students who wish for such help. Thank you for your help to me as a student. I will always remember the help that I got here in Room 226 H.H."

"It's great! I'm really glad I had an opportunity to do this."

"The Writing Lab is a good program to have but should be emphasized more. A lot of people could benefit from this program but don't."

"The Writing Lab helped my writing on my papers in English class as well as my other classes, and it helped my spelling more than anything."

"The Instructors are always very helpful, and once they know what needs to be worked on they get to it and spend enough time on it until you understand it."

"It is my opinion that the Writing Lab is probably the most valuable asset to the English Department of Purdue University .... I myself consider it a privilege to have been part of it."

#### D. FUTURE GROWTH OF THE LAB

For the Fall, 1975 semester the Writing Lab has developed a useful and efficient system of record keeping and a file of instructional materials with which to aid students. While the instructional materials have proved effective, lab members are presently revising some of the handout review sheets and exercises and adding new ones for use during the spring semester. The lab will continue to add materials and is particularly aware of the need for a wider range of self instructional materials that students can use and for materials which incorporate more audio and visual instructional approaches. The lab must also consider the very difficult problem of developing reliable methods for diagnosing deficiencies in writing skills and for evaluating the extent of students' increased writing competence after they have received lab instruction.

The need for adequate secretarial help will continue to be a prime requirement for the lab, and as the number of students served increases, the need for secretarial and clerical assistance will become even more pressing. The Learning Center coordinators, if relieved of some of their secretarial duties, would also be able to utilize their skills more properly.

The Writing Lab, having begun to serve as a resource center for composition instructors in need of materials to teach grammar, should also consider the ways in which it can improve and extend its usefulness in this capacity. The lab should also consult with the English education faculty members to explore the possibility of using the Writing Lab as a practicum for English education students.

#### E. CONCLUSION

While the above suggestions indicate areas for improvement and possible expansion of the lab, we in the Writing Lab feel that we have concluded a highly successful first semester in our new facilities. We believe that we have demonstrated the extensive need for a laboratory to supplement the regular composition program in English and that we have also been able to provide several hundred Purdue students with materials and tutorial instruction which have improved their writing competence. None of this would have been possible without the active encouragement and support of Professor Jacob Adler, head of the English Department, and of Deans Leon Trachtman and Earl Notestine, of the School of HSSE. The quality and quantity of day-to-day help provided by Professor Thomas

Gaston, the lab's senior director, is difficult if not impossible to summarize. We have constantly drawn on his expertise, resources, and patience in order to improve our services to students and instructors, and we look forward to expressing our appreciation through our continued efforts next semester.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1