

The Writer, the Consultant, and the Professor

By Christina Neckles

Fall semesters in the Writing Studio tend to be especially busy. In the first few months of school, motivated first-year students make special efforts to acclimate to the rigors of college-level work and to impress their professors. Bright upperclassmen work to gain further knowledge in their chosen subjects and to keep themselves focused.

In the Writing Studio, consultants strive to help those students continuously improve their writing. Writers arrive at the Studio, assignments in tow, eager to brainstorm and revise papers with their consultants. As consultants, we are trained specifically to help writers construct stronger arguments, but also to do so in a way that helps them prepare work that both meets their specific assignments and that fits into the context of their class.

The question of whether you can or should separate the content of a paper from the writing process has long been a contentious issue among our staff; in the busy fall months, that question arises more and more often. What has become clear is that there are some writing concerns, questions, and ideas that should be presented to a professor before students commit themselves to a “final” draft. It can be easy for both students and consultants to forget that a good piece of argumentative analysis may be only a part of what a professor wants or expects. How can consultants and clients recognize when the best advice is simply, “Talk to your professor.”?

Sometimes, when studio clients and consultants meet, discussing ideas and organizing an argument for a piece of writing is only half the battle. Sometimes, consultants attempt to help students find the best way to argue their points or present their reflections but forget that each student has a particular audience (his or her professor) apart from the phantom well-informed reader.

Sometimes writers believe they understand their material, until they

start writing about it. Sometimes they have to write many pages to notice that a piece requires more research. Sometimes, consultant Christina Foran has found, “if the student doesn’t really know what the professor specifically wants (or doesn’t want) to see in the paper or what the professor means by certain terms or perspectives, I just have to tell them that I can’t help them read the professor’s mind; they just need to go to the source.”

The problem for writers is this: most of the time, it can be difficult to recognize a gap between a paper and a professor’s expectations until it might be too late—just a day or two before an assignment is due. Although many professors in W-level classes have time built in to provide both class discussion of writing assignments and to require conferences, this is not always the case—especially in advanced major classes. And, as a recent *Hustler* article has suggested, many student/professor relationships exist only during their three weekly classroom hours.

In October of last year, the *Vanderbilt Hustler* (10/24/08) published an article that proclaimed: “Few students take advantage of office hours.” *Hustler* staff writer Samantha Orovitz determined that students and professors now generally rely on e-mail for outside communication. For student writers, this e-mail relationship often means eleventh-hour messages about proper citation or including the right type of evidence. In many cases, the arrangement works out fine. But sometimes, as students, we don’t realize that we can better focus our communication with our professors. Occasionally, studio consultants eager to help writers find their “best” argument also need to remind themselves about their writer’s other audience.

As an undergraduate, I remember voluntarily going to a professor’s office hours exactly once. Like many of the students Sarah Orovitz interviewed, I just never “felt the need” to visit professors. Nor was I

“pressed for time” as are so many Vanderbilt undergraduates. Personally, I wanted to talk to my professors more, but was never sure how to approach them if I wasn’t having a specific, isolated problem.

Going to the university writing center was something I never considered. Shy about my writing, I worried that the consultant would be dismissive of my partially formed ideas. Unlike hard math or science, which has problems that can be solved to get a definitive answer, writing concerns (even about those subjects) seem amorphous and personal, somehow beyond the capacity of a confined office hour chat, a quick e-mail, or even a one-on-one writing consultation.

That amorphous quality suggests both the beauty and the danger of writing. Writing may be personal, but when writing for a class, our writing must conform to specific guidelines and expectations both in content and form. Whatever the discipline, all writers must: 1. *Address the assignment* and, 2. *Know their audience*.

As writing consultants, one subsidiary, yet crucial, aspect of our job is to help writers keep those two rules in mind throughout the writing process. Jennifer Krause, a graduate instructor in English, often directs her students to the Writing Studio, but still reminds them, “if the problem is ‘What am I going to write about?’ or anything else related specifically to the book, then it’s not fair to go to the Writing Studio, since the consultants haven’t been sitting in class with us.” But, if the problem is “How do I *begin* to consider what to write about?” then the sympathetic ear and topic invention strategies of a consultant may be exactly what a writer needs before heading back to the professor.

So how, when visiting office hours is the exception rather than the rule, can students avoid finding themselves in the Writing Studio trying to strengthen their writing on a paper that works argumentatively or analytically, but will not substantively satisfy their professors? How can consultants and students work together to recognize the difference?

Directors' Note

by Jennifer Holt, Katherine Fusco, and Gary Jaeger

As the new school year begins, we are excited to be working once more with The Commons and are pleased to be back in our satellite, Commons Center 217, for extended evening and weekend hours. Students who have already visited us at The Commons know that in addition to the convenience of having a team of careful readers and listeners nearer to first-year student living quarters, this space offers a beautiful view of The Commons lawn.

In conjunction with The Commons' official opening, we have taken up the commitment to providing opportunities to unite living and learning by developing a series of writing workshops that serve the particular needs of first-year writers. Residence Life staff and Faculty Heads of House can select from a variety of workshops that focus on writing issues students face during their first year at Vanderbilt as they make the transition from high school to college writing.

We hope that these workshops, along with programs like our first-year student writing group, "Dialogue," will encourage our newest students to grow comfortable testing out their ideas and developing their insights in conversation with one another.

The new academic year also marks the start of other programmatic changes in the Writing Studio that involve tailoring our services to meet requests from graduate students and faculty. It is our mission to become a comprehensive campus resource for all writers working on all sorts of projects.

To that end, this year we are offering a peer consultation service for faculty working on short projects, and we are developing our services for graduate students to include extended consultation sessions as well as dissertation- and other peer-writing groups.

This semester, for example, we are collaborating with the Vanderbilt Center for Nashville Studies to provide VCNS fellows the opportunity to meet in groups facilitated by a Writing Studio consultant. These groups are modeled in part on similar peer writing groups facilitated for the past two years by the Writing Studio for English majors writing honors theses.

Writing groups also present new ways of working towards our mission of promoting intellectual inquiry and providing a variety of opportunities for students to share writing. This is valuable for a number of reasons. Students who are used to reading the writing of advanced writers and disciplinary elders often find it a welcome change of pace, as well as an informative experience, to read and react to the writing of their fellow students.

Furthermore, peers finding themselves with similar challenges can share insights into their own writing processes and identify with others' achievements and frustrations. Writing groups ultimately enable a type of open dialogue about ideas, arguments, and expression that is different from one-to-one consultations where clients are eager to receive advice and consultants are ready to give it.

As we explore possibilities for establishing partnerships across campus and generating group conversations about writing, face-to-face consultation sessions remain the focus of our efforts. This year, we have our largest consultant staff yet, thereby offering more opportunities for Vanderbilt students to talk with helpful peers about all their writing projects. ■

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1. Address the Assignment

Prewriting is one good habit; preparing to prewrite is a bit different. In any given school day, students may have two or three writing assignments thrown at them, and as students advance in their majors, those assignments can look more and more alike.

Students should be sure to tailor their writing to the assignment in hand—a paper about the American election process will probably have very different requirements in a political science class than it might in a history class or sociology class.

Try to identify key words in the assignment by making notes about the "big questions and themes" of the course. If there is only a verbal assignment, try writing out your own. Keeping the big questions and themes in your mind might help you and your writing consultant stay on track during a meeting. (You can also run your formulation of a verbal assignment by the professor to see if your ideas match.)

The best work in the Writing Studio usually happens between consultants and writers who have a strong sense of the real paper assignment. As consultants, we try to keep the assignment in our sights (literally and figuratively), so that our writers and we can determine the content questions that need to be addressed to the professor. It is likely that even a small amount of prewriting and thinking will help the writer and consultant determine early on what kind of questions to ask a professor about the assignment. Ask them in person or via e-mail, but know that they need to be asked.

2. Know your Audience

Let your audience get to know you. Professors have a variety of different expectations for the audience their students should write to in their assignments. While in general academic writing it is usually safe to assume that you are writing for an audience of intelligent peers, your professor is still reading (and grading) the paper.

The better you know your professor and your professor knows you, the more likely it is that your audiences will look similar. Some of the most successful students thrive partially by getting to know their professors, and letting their professors get to know them. Lauren Wood Hoffer, currently a Ph.D. candidate in the English department, always "loved" office hours. "I didn't go that often, though—just about as much as I needed to before and after big assignments or sometimes, with my favorite [professors], to discuss some reading that really interested me." Christina Foran, a Peabody senior, manages to interact personally with her professors even without heading to their offices. "If I have more comments about the day's topic, I usually just talk with the professor after class."

While many students interact with their professors regularly, occasionally making those interactions strategic can have positive effects on one's grasp of course-related writing assignments. On several occasions, I have worked with writers whose ideas were strong, but who seemed to bring out aspects of the assignment I might not have focused on from reading the assignment alone. In these cases, it has been the client's knowledge of course construction and their professor's expectations that has made it clear whether or not the paper addresses the assignment well.

The relationship among the writer, the consultant, the professor, and a piece of writing is never quite stable. In the Writing Studio, we may focus on writing, but part of good college writing is learning how to constantly renegotiate such instability. ■

Getting Schooled: VU undergrads teach creative writing, learn about educational inequity in Metro public schools

by Chris Sailer

[Word.] is a self-governed student organization that offers month-long creative writing workshops in Metro public high schools. During class, teams of undergraduate facilitators use writing exercises, spoken word performance, song, and discussions of student and professional works to help students develop their intuitions about words and writing.

Outside of class, students prepare portfolios of poetry or fiction and e-mail drafts of their work to an undergraduate mentor who guides them through the writing process. The object of [Word.] is not to create polished writers. That is simply too large a task for four weeks. Rather, we encourage students to use their writing to communicate their thoughts, ideas and beliefs.

Public education as we know it was a by-product of the Industrial Revolution. Wholesale migration to urban centers and factory employment sounded the death knell for Jefferson's agrarian republic; yet ironically, industrialization spurred massive investment in our educational infrastructure. Robber barons like John D. Rockefeller poured vast sums of money into public ed and involved themselves in the design of educational systems and curricula.

This was not philanthropy, but rather an investment in human capital. Complex machines required educated operators. But educated operators did not mean *thinking* operators, a distinction carefully drawn by the architects of our education system.

One of the early twentieth century's most respected educators, Cubberly believed that "Our schools are, in a sense, factories in which the raw products (children) are to be shaped and fashioned into products to meet the various demands of life." The industrialists helped compulsory public education become reality, but in the process, their private ambitions subverted the values of our nation's greatest public resource.

Can we claim that today's schools teach Americans to "judge for themselves" by encouraging critical and independent thought? Or are we still churning out cogs for the great American machine? The industrialists' design for public ed survives in today's dominant pedagogical philosophies, which continue to stress intellectual conformity. Indeed, because policies like No Child Left Behind (NCLB) exhibit a singular focus on standardized tests and other dubious measures of "student achievement," they have only intensified the problem.

There are hardworking, passionate teachers engaging students daily in Metro schools. However, because these teachers are rare, many students will encounter only one or two of them in thirteen years of compulsory schooling. Moreover, because NCLB ties school funding to performance on standardized tests, those teachers who do believe in Jefferson's vision are often unable to realize it.

Unbound by NCLB and passionate about the potential of public ed, [Word.] works to achieve Jefferson's vision in two ways. First, because we believe that words have an intrinsic power to affect great change, we encourage students to find and use their authentic voices. Second, because writing is a framework for critical thought, we teach students to "judge for themselves" the facts of their personal and social realities.

NCLB's emphasis on testing may prohibit a teacher from introducing students to a poem like Yusef Komunyakaa's "Tu Do Street." But as non-school actors, we are able not only to use Komunyakaa to talk about segregation, re-segregation, and the legacy of racial inequality in a 90% black, 90% poverty rate school like Stratford, but also able to read and discuss students' own works on the same issues. Last semester, we worked with approximately 160 students in four schools. This semester we expect to double those numbers. By helping our students realize the writer within them, we help them become powerful advocates for positive change in their schools and in their communities. ■



The project began after I transferred to Vanderbilt in fall 2006. A proud (but concerned) graduate of area public schools, I was well acquainted with the fact that, in the No Child Left Behind era, the aim of public ed is in many ways to standardize intellect. For reasons I will discuss later, students are rarely challenged to think critically, and independence is discouraged. This troubled me greatly as a student, but I did not realize how much of a problem this was until I arrived at college and was first challenged to think creatively.

Thomas Jefferson believed that public education was meant, "to enable every American to judge for themselves what will endanger or secure their liberties." Jefferson urged his fellow lawmakers to "preach...a crusade against ignorance," to divide every county into hundreds and establish a free school within each. However, it was some time before most Americans gained access to education.

The industrialists needed workers who could perform repetitive tasks quickly, and who would not question the management. Thus, when Rockefeller formed his General Education Board—a board that would distribute some \$300 million to districts around the country—to promote the cause of education, its view of public ed's purpose differed somewhat from Jefferson's.

Rockefeller said, "In our dreams, people yield themselves with perfect docility to our molding hands. The present education conventions of intellectual and character education fade from their minds, and, unhampered by tradition, we work our own good will upon a grateful and responsive folk." Many prominent educators—especially those who oversaw large public districts like those in Chicago or Boston—adopted Rockefeller's philosophies.

Ellwood Cubberly, superintendent of San Diego Public Schools and later Dean of Stanford's School of Education, is exemplary.

UPCOMING EVENTS

OCTOBER

Thursday, October 9
8:00–9:00 p.m.

**First Impressions and Last Impressions:
Effective Introductions and Conclusions**

Sunday, October 12
4:00–5:30 p.m.

**Dialogue: A Writing Community for
First-Year Students**

*Dialogue also meets on the following
Sundays during the fall semester:
October 26, November 2, November 9,
and November 16*

Wednesday, October 15
6:30–7:30 p.m.

**Fake It 'Til You Make It? Tone and Academic
Voice in Writing**

Thursday, October 23
12:10–1:00 p.m.

Words and Woods
featuring Steve Baskauf

Monday, October 27
6:00–7:00 p.m.

**Orchestrating Order in Your Paper:
Organizing Your Writing**

NOVEMBER

Thursday, November 6
4:10–6:00 p.m.

On Writing
with Amy Griffith

Monday, November 17
2:00–3:00 p.m.

How to Be Your Own Editor

Connecting through Stories: Help for the Medical School Application Essay

by Bryn Chancellor

Dr. Robert Baum, M.D., loves the written word. Novels, medical journals of the past centuries, you name it. Of late, he has been reading works by historian Shelby Foote. Like any good booklover, he often asks colleagues and acquaintances what they are reading, and he jots down the tips in hopes of getting to them. Alas, his roles as Director of Vanderbilt's Health Professions Advisory Office and Assistant Professor of Orthopaedics don't always leave a lot of free time for pleasure reading. Still, he has a passion for good writing.

This love of good writing, in fact, relates to his work of advising Vanderbilt students who are applying to schools in the medical professions. The rigorous application process features a personal essay, in which students must convince an admissions board of their motivations, commitment, and background, all within a short space. As a former member of Vanderbilt Medical School's admissions committee, Baum knows firsthand how important that essay can be.

Baum said, "An average essay won't keep a good applicant out. A great essay won't get an applicant who's not strong enough to be accepted in, but it can really get people's attention and perhaps be a significant factor." In a typical set of fifteen essays, "twelve were average. One or two were outstanding, and one people were blown away by," he said. "It was so nice, from my perspective, to be able to meet these people who wrote these impressive essays and get to know them. And from the students' perspective, how nice is it for them to

walk in where the interviewer likes them before they even come?"

Baum wants his advisees to make those striking impressions in their writing. His interest in improving students' essays led him in spring 2008 to collaborate with the Writing Studio on a workshop that focused on the application personal essay. He said he envisioned an event "where you had people from both perspectives: the admissions committee who reads these essays and the Writing Studio which has the ability to help students write a more compelling, and technically more proficient, essay. Obviously it would be [students'] words, but even the great writers have editors."

The three-hour workshop ran in two parts. In the first section, doctors who serve on the applications committee offered advice on what they admire and hope to discover in applicants' essays. In the second section, four Writing Studio consultants presented tips on how to craft meaningful essays. Baum said that students' feedback about the workshop has been positive, and he wants to do another session again in the spring, though "probably later in the afternoon," he said with a chuckle, recalling some sleepy-eyed students at 9 a.m. on a Saturday.

He also encourages applicants to meet individually with Writing Studio consultants throughout the essay-writing process. Baum hopes that such workshop and individual interactions will help students compose not only a technically proficient essay but also "an essay that is really able to capture their feelings

and who they are, to tell about their journey, their story, and convey that in a way that the committee finds special."

Compelling storytelling also is important to Baum as he writes some 200 letters for his advisees. When he interviews students, his goal "is to try in some way to connect with them. So I try to get something personal that I can add into a letter." He recalled a young woman who as a child would go with her father, an ophthalmologist, to his office. Her job for the day was to hold the hands of elderly people who came in for minor procedures. With a smile, Baum said, "And how sweet is that. I put it in her letter because I thought it was very sweet, but also because I thought it was consistent with whom I perceived she was as a person. It humanized her for a committee who might not otherwise have a sense of who this person was."

Beyond the application essay, Baum hopes to convey to his advisees a love of words like he has, and he also sees writing as an avenue for stronger doctor-patient relationships. He said, "There is a trend toward narrative medicine. Some of it involves getting the story of the patient and hearing the story, because they're not just a collection of symptoms, they are also individuals trying to deal with all the issues that one faces in life." A strong grasp of the writing process might help aspiring doctors "be more understanding of and more able to get the story, not just of the health issues but the entirety of the patient. That might be stretching," he said with a laugh, "but it sounds good." ■