

Celebrating Student Writing: A Reflection on the Undergraduate Writing Symposium

by Ariel Clemons

The process of writing a paper in college can be truly intimidating, and finding the time to do it properly can seem impossible. From inception to completion, from the moment I pull my chair out from underneath my desk to the last few minutes I spend correcting punctuation errors, my heart consistently races. Also, as a student who is involved in many activities outside of the classroom, it's hard not to ask myself before beginning to write a paper: How much time and effort am I willing to devote to this to get an A? What about a B? But, something just seems wrong if all I have accomplished from my hours of hard work and late-nighters (if not all-nighters) is a letter grade on a piece of paper, which is why it is nice to celebrate the writing that comes from truly making an effort to find the time to sit down and face my fears.

Vanderbilt's First Annual Undergraduate Writing Symposium, which I had the honor of participating in during the spring of my freshman year, went far beyond rewarding those students who had written "A" papers; it celebrated their writing and recognized their commitment and dedication to academics. It was a testament to the fine nature of the University that we attend and the pride that Vanderbilt has in the intellectual achievements of its undergraduate students. Having the Provost address us at the beginning of the event and the Dean of the Commons address us at the end solidified its importance and confirmed how much of an honor it was to be invited to participate.

Furthermore, the event facilitated dialogue among students that otherwise may have never come about. When I turned to another first-year student sitting next to me and introduced myself, instead of having a commonplace conversation about what dorm we were living in or how much we loved "fourth meal," we found ourselves discussing film as a literary work. Without question I would pinpoint this moment as the first time that I realized what the University's commitment to living and learning in the same space is meant to accomplish-- a sharing of intellectual thoughts and ideas.

The Symposium created a sense of com-

munity among us as participants. We sat together and listened to each other read our papers out loud, and to my own surprise I found myself captivated by what the other students had written. From creative short stories to biology papers, the Symposium gave me the opportunity to listen to what my peers were writing about in classes that I might never take. It showed me the diversity of interests that students possess, which was not only intellectually stimulating but also a privilege that I feel lucky to have been given.

I reread, reanalyzed, and learned. A paper which otherwise would have become nothing more than just another "dusty" computer file came alive again.

The Undergraduate Writing Symposium did more than merely recognize a paper I had written for my English literature class. It boosted my confidence as a writer and gave me the opportunity to engage with other students on a purely academic level. As a first-year student who was still settling in to college-level expectations, having been



Ariel Clemons receives her certificate from Dean Wcislo

After I read my own paper, the floor opened up to questions: Why did I analyze certain passages the way that I had? How did I even come to see the connection between the characters I had written about? The questions I was asked made me think back to the choices I had made, why I had made them, and even made me realize that I could have taken my paper in a completely different direction. Thinking about a paper I had written months before proved to me that writing is a process, and the only way you can get better at it is the same as with everything else: practice, practice, practice. After the Symposium was over, I went back to my dorm room and reread my paper by myself. While I didn't make any official edits (I'm not *that* devoted), I did rethink the decisions I had made and my reasons for making them.

selected to participate showed me the potential that I have as both a student and a writer, and highlighted the importance of written communication in every field of study.

In addition, I learned that while Vanderbilt might present great opportunities to its students, it is truly up to us as the students to take the initiative in pursuing them. Sure, I was nominated to participate in the symposium, but it was up to me to decide whether I wanted to accept the nomination and submit my paper for review. The Undergraduate Writing Symposium was a celebration of the extraordinary talent that exists within our University's student body as well as a reminder of how much the opportunity to share and exchange our thoughts and ideas contributes to our educational experience. ■

Directors' Note

by Jennifer Holt, Katherine Fusco,
and Gary Jaeger

Although the Writing Studio was originally conceived as a place for undergraduates to work on their writing, we have always made its services available to graduate students. Recently, we have been able to redouble our efforts in bringing writing support and programming to the graduate student community. Graduate students can now schedule a series of extended appointments each semester; these special sessions allow consultant and client to work through longer pieces of writing than would be possible in regular 50-minute appointments. Graduate students also have the option of meeting with the same graduate consultant for all of their appointments, so that consultants and writers can engage in an ongoing conversation.

In addition to expanding our consultation services, the Writing Studio is offering a number of programs for graduate students this year. In October, we facilitated two workshops in coordination with the Graduate School, one for dissertation writers and one for those preparing to propose their dissertation projects. This semester, and in partnership with the Center for Science Communication in the Department of Medicine, we will facilitate a workshop series on the first Friday of each month on reporting primary research. We also will revisit the concerns of dissertation writers by hosting a revision workshop for them on February 20.

Although we are delighted to be casting our net wider, we maintain our focus on undergraduate writing. On March 28, we will host the second annual Undergraduate Writing Symposium (see Ariel Clemons' article on last year's event). We continue to pursue innovative ways of helping first-year students transition to college-level writing as well as helping advanced students with projects like scholarship applications and senior honors theses. It remains our mission to support writers at all levels and in all disciplines, and we look forward to growing our services for Vanderbilt's graduate and undergraduate students.

It's All in Your Head: Conquering Cognitive Dissonance During the Writing Process

by Dustin Lynn

Back in 2007, during my inaugural year as a Writing Consultant, I thought myself pretty much invincible. Sociology papers? A walk in the park! English papers? Bring on the Bard! It wasn't too soon into my tenure at the Writing Studio, however, that I encountered my first philosophy paper and the sudden decimation of my confidence as a writing consultant.

I remember the initial tension that swelled inside of me as the student began reading his "Introduction to Ethics" paper. The topic was one that I had not previously crossed and the form of the paper threw me for a loop – making me question whether I really was a good writing consultant.

These symptoms are classic signs of cognitive dissonance. In its most simple form, cognitive dissonance is the tension or even panic that one experiences upon receiving information that is counter to personally held thoughts, beliefs, or schemas. Until that point in my collegiate education, I had only written English or sociology papers, and my knowledge of writing formats and subject matter was primarily pulled from those two disciplines. Understandably, being expected to consult a student with a paper that confounded me definitely made me panic. I found myself blindly asking questions simply to gain an elementary grasp of the topic, and eventually left the 50-minute session defeated, feeling as if I had not been helpful to the student.

Today, as a student of human development, I look back on the experience and offer the following strategies adapted from Leon Festinger, creator of cognitive dissonance theory, for both writers and consultants who experience discomfort upon encountering writing in an unfamiliar cannon:

Change Attitudes. This strategy implores disgruntled writers to alter either the new belief or the currently held belief in order to make the two discrepant pieces of information congruous. While this strategy might initially alleviate some of the tension associated with writing or consulting in a different discipline, I would advise that one proceed with caution. Though each discipline maintains its own unique principles, the foundations of good writing remain the same regardless of the type of paper. So, as writers and consultants, it may prove more pragmatic to expand our ideas regarding writing format to accommodate the new information we encounter while applying conventional knowledge of writing to papers outside of our own disciplines. Instead of attempting to alter one discipline to fit in the "box" of the other, incorporate ideas from general writing practices with the individual conventions of each discipline to enhance both general writing skills and subject-specific skills.

Add Information. Similar to "changing attitudes," adding information suggests that writers and consultants actively incorporate ideas from the new writing discipline into their writing "tool box." In this case, the cognitive dissonance that one may experience results from not having a holistic picture of the situation, and thus, incorporating new information can tame the writer's or writing consultant's tension through education. Researching the conventions associated with writing in various disciplines not only will allow for a nuanced understanding of what is required for different types of papers, but also will alleviate the initial distress associated with writing such pieces, since writers will at least possess a conceptual framework to apply to their writing. "Adding information" also challenges writers to become more familiar with unfamiliar types of writing and may even improve their general writing skills, since they will acquire a new way of approaching writing. Consultants can particularly benefit from this exercise, since they will be better equipped to approach papers from outside of their own disciplines.

Both of these techniques offer guidance for reducing the anxiety that one might experience upon writing a paper or consulting a writer who is writing a paper that resides outside of one's areas of expertise. However, for these techniques to be successful, writers and consultants both must remain open to new ideas and realize that writing outside of one's discipline is a learning process. Writers and consultants should readily explore novel ideas and ask questions in order to become accustomed to foreign forms of writing. Finally, writers and consultants alike should remain confident in their abilities and embrace the challenge of writing in a different discipline rather than succumbing to the anxiety of the unfamiliar.

Now, as a writing consultant with three years of experience, I no longer evade the opportunity to assist students in disciplines other than my own due, in part, to my application of the above-mentioned strategies. Instead, I welcome the challenge of consulting students in any discipline – or at least we'll see how that goes with the biological sciences student that I'm preparing to consult next hour. ■

Metaphors We Write By

by John Morrell

Metaphors are not merely things to be seen beyond. In fact, one can see beyond them only by using other metaphors. It is as though the ability to comprehend experience through metaphor were a sense, like seeing or touching or hearing, with metaphors providing the only ways to perceive and experience much of the world. Metaphor is as much a part of our functioning as our sense of touch, and as precious.

--George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (1980)

There are a variety of metaphors that writers and writing consultants use to conceptualize the writing process, the written text, and the process of reading. A careful listen to Writing Studio conversations yields clear categories of metaphor. These categories include anatomical metaphors (the bare bones of an argument, fleshing out ideas), architectural metaphors (foundation, support, framing), cooking metaphors (spicing it up), domestic metaphors (cleaning, polishing, straightening), military metaphors (marshaling evidence, defending claims), and spatial metaphors (going in the right direction), among many others.

This preponderance of metaphors is not surprising. In *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), George Lakoff and Mark Johnson remind us that metaphors are fundamental to the way that we make sense of the world: “the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor.”ⁱ

A striking thing one notices in attempts to express writing processes is the mixing of metaphors. Here is a brief description of a Writing Studio session from the point of view of a writing consultant:

“Rachel came in to discuss her AMCAS essay. She had two drafts with her. We looked at some of her stories and images and talked about how she could sharpen them and distill them into a message about her motives for going to Med School. Then we talked about how to structure the essay so that the images could lead into a discussion about her credentials.”

In this example, two metaphors stand out. Sharpening and distilling are mixed, but complementary, metaphors. There is a kind of exploratory redundancy here, with the consultant drawing upon two metaphors to say the same thing in different ways. In the context of “images,” sharpening is a photographic metaphor emphasizing edges, based upon a metaphor of abrasion – sharp-

ening metal knives or swords. Distilling, on the other hand, is a chemistry metaphor about purity and concentration – eliminating impurities and concentrating the essence of the liquid. For the reflective consultant, a question arises from this close reading: to what extent does mixing metaphors inhibit or enable the interactions between writing consultant and client? More generally, how can metaphors most enrich and personalize our understanding of the writing process?

In “Politics and the English Language,” Orwell admonishes against the laziness in writing to which mixed metaphors give expression:

By using stale metaphors, similes and idioms, you save much mental effort at the cost of leaving your meaning vague, not only for your reader but for yourself. This is the significance of mixed metaphors. The sole aim of metaphor is to call up a visual image. When these images clash...it can be taken as certain that the writer is not seeing a mental image of the objects he is naming.”ⁱⁱ

Arguing that language is inevitably political, Orwell warns that linguistic laziness indicates laziness in thought – “the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts.”ⁱⁱⁱ For Orwell, and this is why his essay is so frequently taught in composition courses, the point is that the process is reversible – messy thinking is a habit that can be changed with effort – through better writing.

Orwell’s critique offers useful advice for consultants and writers alike. Stated positively, Orwell advocates enlivening metaphors, deliberately elaborated. When they meet with clients, consultants often use metaphors to illustrate their discussions about writing and the writing process. Weak or fuzzy metaphors are less likely to serve clients. Moreover, the vividness of the consultant’s metaphor can serve as an example for clients who are struggling to express clearly their own ideas.

Many students come to the Writing Studio with a largely unconscious set of metaphors that proscribe their thinking about writing. The danger is that these metaphors can be shallow and inconsistent – clichés more than metaphors. These shallow metaphors, however, might be reinvigorated, rethought, so as to enable thinking about work on writing.

For example, perhaps the most common, and therefore most diffuse, metaphor that guides student thinking about writing is the metaphor of “flow.” Let us think through it carefully, looking for details that make it useful as a tool for understanding writing. Again, let’s begin with a consultant’s description of a session:

Aaron came in with a paper for MUSL 149 on the role of the hip-hop artist in fighting corporate oppression. He wanted to work on “flow” and so we mostly worked on reorganizing his paragraphs around topic sentences. We also spoke a bit about how to effectively use song lyrics as textual evidence.

What is it that writers mean when they say that they want to work on the flow of their papers? Flow applies to both writing and reading. First, writers want their ideas to move easily from their minds to the page; they want the words to “flow” out of them. Second, they are talking about the text and the experience of the reader. When writers want to know if their papers flow, they want to know whether their claims move smoothly from one to the other. Writers want their readers to be carried along by writing, swept up by language or logic.

In the example above, in order to work on “flow,” the consultant takes a practical approach, focusing on topic sentences. This is an insight into the metaphor -- misplaced paragraph breaks can cause a snag in reading. Topic sentences operate importantly as transitions and foreshadowing; they alert the reader to what she might expect in the paragraph, facilitating the smooth movement

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HOD Assignment Advisor:

Leslie Foutch

In Residence

from March 4-April 1

Thursdays

10am-1pm

UPCOMING

EVENTS

february

Thursday, February 11

4:10–5:50 p.m. Alumni Hall 117

How to Negotiate a Psycho Roommate

Thursday, February 11

6:00–7:00 p.m. Cohen 323

Writing for HART

Thursday, February 18

5:10–6:00 p.m. Alumni Hall 117

On Writing: Attack of the Bloggers!

with Adam Gold, Sean Braisted, and Yvonne Smith

Saturday, February 20

8:30 a.m. - 12:00 p.m. Buttrick 101

Advanced Dissertation Revision Techniques

Wednesday, February 24

4:00–5:30 p.m. Buttrick 201

Organization

march

Tuesday, March 16

4:10–5:50 p.m. Alumni Hall 117

How to Tell Your Family to Go to Hell [in a nice way]

Tuesday, March 23

6:00–7:30 p.m. Alumni Hall 117

Dinner and a Draft

with Leonard Folgarait

Thursday, March 25

7:00–8:00 p.m. Commons Center 235

Writing Philosophy Papers

Sunday, March 28

3:00–7:00 p.m. Commons Center

Undergraduate Writing Symposium

Tuesday, March 30

8:00–9:00 p.m. Commons Center 233

Crevision! (Creative Writing + Revision)

april

Tuesday, April 6

6:00–7:30 p.m. Alumni Hall 117

Dinner and a Draft

with Beth Shinn

Thursday, April 8

4:10–5:50 p.m. Alumni Hall 117

How to Tell a Bunch of Employees They're Fired

Friday, April 16

2:00–3:30 p.m. Alumni Hall 117

Words and Woods

with Steve Baskauf

Metaphors We Write By, continued from p. 3

from one sentence to the next or from one idea to the next.

Even as vague a term as 'flow' can be resuscitated through a more precise working through of the metaphor.

In physics, fluid dynamics identifies two types of flow, laminar and turbulent. Laminar flow occurs when a fluid flows in parallel layers, with no disruption between the layers. Turbulence, on the other hand, is characterized by chaotic property changes and rapid variation of pressure and velocity. In a river, turbulence is characterized by recirculation and eddies. As writers and consultants, it is important to consider which type of flow it is that we're after, to locate the places where an argument changes from laminar to turbulent flow.

If the reader is meant to be carried along by the flow of an essay, we might meaningfully compare the reader to a kayaker or canoeist. When writers want to work on the flow of their papers, they are generally talking about a feeling of smoothness; they are talking about laminar flow. But what some paddlers want is turbulence. For them, the fun is in the rapids. The concept of flow can thus be

applied too easily, encouraging a client to avoid counterexamples, difficult interpretations, or other potential turbulence. Elaborating the metaphor of flow to include both the turbulent and laminar varieties can help client make good judgments about when and how to redirect a reader from more turbulent waters (the elaboration of an important and complex idea) to smoother ones, and back again.

Metaphor is an inescapable foundation of thought, and the metaphors we use to understand writing and the writing process powerfully influence the strategies we use in writing and consultation. Even thinking of writing as a conversation is a metaphor, perhaps the most important metaphor to which we give substance in the Writing Studio.

Reflecting again on Orwell's advice, it is important for writers and writing consultants to utilize the full conceptual potential of the metaphors that they use to think about writing. At the Writing Studio, consultants and writers can work together to identify metaphors that they bring to consultations, complicate them, and fashion them into more useful tools for improving writing and under-

standing the writing process. They can also generate new metaphors for understanding writing. But in the end, perhaps it is undesirable to insist too firmly that our metaphors be internally consistent. Metaphors operate by mixing, by juxtaposing unlike things. Let's not draw the limit at two. ■

i. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. *Metaphors We Live By*. University of Chicago Press, 1980. p. 3

ii. George Orwell. "Politics and the English Language." (1946) http://www.george-orwell.org/Politics_and_the_English_Language/0.html/

iii. Ibid.

MARK YOUR CALENDARS!

Undergraduate Writing Symposium
March 28, 2010
3:00–7:00 p.m.
Commons Center

writing
studio

www.vanderbilt.edu/writing • 343-2225 • 117 Alumni Hall • 217 Commons Center



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