

## *UP Integrated Writing Center*



**Learning Resource Center  
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### *Faculty Information Sheet: Using Writing Assistants*

#### **Peer Tutoring: does it really work?**

Research shows that students respond positively to writing suggestions and advice provided by peers who have taken the same courses and/or have responded to similar assignments. Research also shows that peer tutoring works best when the professor and peer tutor (WA) form a 'closed loop' of information, in which the tutor knows the professor's assignments and knows exactly how the professor wants the peer tutor to help his or her students. Aware of such a closed loop, students using the WA have confidence in their peer's advice and learn more.

#### **How do I know that Writing Assistants are qualified to help my students?**

Departments or schools nominate each year one or two majors who excel as writers in their discipline. These outstanding writers then enroll in *English 417: Composition Theory and Practice* and receive extensive training in writing pedagogy and hands-on experience as tutors. This process guarantees that WAs have both generalist and discipline-specific skills to best serve our campus population as a whole.

#### **Why should I send my students to the Writing Center?**

Because all writers, whether struggling or proficient, can benefit from an outsider's perspective on their writing. The responsibility of writing instruction ultimately rests on a professor's shoulders; however, peer tutors can facilitate communication between student and professor by explaining assignments, deciphering comments, and/or pointing out patterns of errors the student might not have noticed. If the WAs know you and your assignments, the results are better.

#### **How does a Writing Assistant (WA) know what I want?**

The best way to ensure that a tutor knows and does what you want is to provide the Writing Center with as much detailed information as possible. Send us your assignment sheet or prompt, or better yet, invite a WA to your class when you give out an assignment and spend a few minutes with a WA in your office. If the WAs understand your requirements and directives first-hand, they will more likely 'translate' them accurately during tutoring sessions. Also, in your comments on student papers, explain explicitly what you want them to work on with the WAs (but note two or three issues, not an overwhelming number at once).

### **What do Writing Assistants do, anyway?**

Tutoring sessions are most effective when the professor has indicated the specific problems the student writer most urgently needs to address. The WA then helps the student respond to the professor's comments, thus helping the student improve his or her writing skills and gain confidence for subsequent assignments.

Without professorial direction, in the standard 30-minute session WAs use triage-like skills to focus on the most urgent issues they find in the paper or draft. A typical session will involve questions to make the writer aware of higher order issues such as organization and lower order issues such as recurring grammatical or punctuation errors. WAs offer strategies to address both kinds of problems.

In short: WAs don't 'fix' a paper, but they help writers sharpen their skills and can help students learn specific writing skills, especially those their professor finds most critical to the student's success.

### **The "G" word: can you fix my students' grammar?**

The WAs can help students learn to fix some grammar problems, but, no, they can't *fix* a writer who has many major problems with grammar. WAs cannot effectively review many grammar rules with writers in a 30-minute session. But a professor may instruct a student writer to ask the WA for help on a specific problem. Or if a WA notices one or two problems consistently recurring in one paper, he or she may point those out and suggest a return visit to address these issues in greater depth. Grammar, mechanics, and stylistic concerns persist in student writing and faculty grading and require the patient attention over time of professors, WAs, and the writing students themselves.

### **Does Peer Tutoring actually improve student writing?**

Yes, peer tutoring does work, having the greatest positive effect with a clear and close relationship between professor and peer tutor. Recent Writing Center scholarship places assessment at the forefront of Writing Program concerns. The English Department plans to study, share, and implement useful strategies to assess and demonstrate tutoring effectiveness. Look for announcements this term inviting you to participate in Brown Bag Discussions on Assigning, Teaching, and Assessing writing across the disciplines.

