



MESSIAH  
COLLEGE

THE WRITING  
CENTER

SPECIAL  
POINTS OF  
INTEREST:

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RITER'S BLOCK:

Puzzling out the Writing Craft

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## A Taste of her Own Medicine: An Alumna's perspective on editing

By Danielle Sahn Surra

For my senior seminar paper, I wrote about the relationship between William Blake and contemporary children's literature. By the time a journal decided to publish it, I had spent more than a year sculpting, adding little details, and smoothing out the rough bits. If the essay were a piece of granite, I would have whittled it away into oblivion. But even after that long journey, my essay still had one challenge to face; *Children's Literature* assigned an editor to review my final draft and prepare it for publication. I put on my sackcloth and ashes and got ready to mourn.

Just as I expected, an anonymous editor had filled the gutters with deletions, inser-

tions, and comments. My cursor hovered over the first comment ("Should there be a



Photo: Kinley Zook

period here?") and the primordial monster that lives in the pit of every writer reared up in protest. No, there should not be a period

there! If Blake didn't want one there, then I don't either!

As I drew breath and got ready to sling insults at my faceless enemy, a scene flashed into my mind. I sit on one side of a table, the client sits catty-corner to me, and the client's paper rests on the table between us, looking fragile and exposed. We read the paper over together, and inevitably we discover an unnecessary phrase or paragraph. There is nothing that can soften the blow - not the warm yellow light of a desk lamp, the smell of percolating coffee, or even a friendly and reasonable tone of voice. "But I spent an hour on that paragraph!" the client agonizes, knowing what is

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## The Perfect Prompt by Alyssa Lord

Last staff meeting, the Writing Center tutors brainstormed together about what would make a perfect prompt: what would help students write best and what would help tutors guide students.

### Good Prompts...

... let students know what key essentials must show up in the paper (ie: This paper must discuss problems and suggest possible solutions )  
 ... are open enough for the student to question and de-

cide a thesis

... are closed enough that the student has some idea where to begin

... can be extremely minimal/open IF the professor really has no expectations for what the student should write about and if one purpose of the assignment is to get students generating questions for themselves. (However, if the professor wants something specific from the assignment, it should be clearly stated.)

... define an audience

... consist of directions unique and specific to the assignment (whereas other general writing instruction/pet peeves should be separately included in the syllabus and understood to apply to every paper -- this would shorten some prompts to a more manageable length so that tutors and students alike do not have to wade through, sifting for the assignment)  
 ... indicate objectives for the

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Danielle Sahn Surra

“Reading an editor’s comments is like the writing tutor’s Lent, a time for self-examination and introspection.”



Photo: Kinley Zook

## A Taste of her own Medicine continued from Pg. 1

necessary but fighting it nonetheless. I coax, I rationalize, I reason; I quip that it is better to send one little line to the gang plank than to let it sink the rest of the ship. Still the client resists, and I sigh. Why are they always so reluctant to refine their writing?

More than a year later, the sweat beading on my forehead, I grappled with hard truths. Reading an editor’s comments is like the writing tutor’s Lent, a time for

self-examination and introspection. Did I extend my sympathy to my clients, as one imperfect writer to another? Did I phrase my queries courteously, provide my full patience? If not, then I certainly will from now on. I remember now what it feels like to trot my prize phrases out in front of a panel of judges—and have them sent packing, their tails between their legs. Writing tutors need a regular dose of this experience, to remind them

what it’s like. They need this experience so that they can say to the client, their voices laden with sympathy, “I know it hurts, but it’s for the best.”

*Danielle Sahn Surra graduated from Messiah College in 2009, having tutored at the Writing Center for 2 years. Currently, she proofreads for a pharmaceutical company in Philadelphia, while working on several writing projects.*

## The Perfect Prompt Continued from Pg. 1

paper

Looking through *The Best of First Year Seminar Fall 2007*, we found two examples of prompts that fulfill our objectives...

Assignment from Jonathan Lauer (pg. 49) — an example of a more specific prompt:

Choose to write a compare/contrast integration of the writer’s experiences with racism and injustice and the social climate suggested by the song “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll” (1964), OR a comparison of Dylan’s first and most recent studio albums, Bob Dylan (1962) and *Modern Times* (2006), OR a comparison of the 1967-released version of “Don’t Look Back” and the recently released alternate footage available in the library on the 40th anniversary “Don’t Look Back” DVD.

Length: 4-5 pages  
Audience: A local chapter of

the Evangelicals for Social Justice OR Readers of the Harrisburg Patriot News arts section OR first-year Messiah film students Objectives: consider the progress or lack thereof we have made in this country since 1964 in the area of racial equality while reviewing examples of racism and injustice from your own life experience OR trace themes and musical expression in Dylan’s career, looking for commonalities and differences over a 40-year period OR learn more about point of view and authorial decisions in the artistic process.

Here’s an example of a more open prompt from Ursula Schreffler. The one thing we thought might help it would be to specify whether students should address all of the questions or focus on a few/one.

Length: 4-5 pages  
Objective: compose a thesis-driven essay using library research

Do some reading on a topic that interests you. What are some current trends in your subject area? What are some current problems/controversial issues in that area? What can you teach your audience about your subject? How well or poorly have experts in the field presented the subject to your reading audience? What does current research say about your subject?

Formulate your thesis by presenting an opinion. Your thesis can be in the form of an illustration, a comparison, a cause-effect relationship, or persuasion.

This prompt presents a more-open ended assignment. While this type of assignment works, it would be nice to know a few things more: are students expected to answer all the questions or are they just jumping off points? Can

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# Featured Tutor: Elizabeth Coon

By Emily Williams



Elizabeth Coon

*“Oxford is teaching me that I can combine a practical and academic career.”*



Photo:  
Emily Williams

One of our tutors is studying abroad at The University of Oxford this semester, and (because she misses the dear ol' Writing Center) graciously answered some questions about her experiences in England. I give you, Elizabeth Coon, Oxford Scholar, historian, and erstwhile Writing Center tutor.

*How is it living in such a history-full place as a history major?*

One of the most wonderful things about being an American in Oxford is that everything considered historical has no equivalent in the States. I walk by a Saxon-era church (graveyard intact). Reading 150-year-old books as part of my research seems no big deal anymore. I had lunch with an English friend from church on Sunday, and learned that her house was built in 1901 but is considered new. I think probably my favorite discovery, beyond the amazing libraries, was the fact that some construction workers were redoing the road in High Street, and underneath the cement were cobblestones that had been paved over years ago.

Because there is so much history here, it's treated very differently. Americans in such a historical place would be taking pictures constantly, and we do get tourists on the weekends, but most of

the time it's business as usual. The town somehow manages to maintain all its historical locations and function as a university, publishing center and many other things.

*Tell us about the Library --is it overwhelming?*

Oh wow. Well, if by Library you mean the Bodleian, just slightly :) It has close to 9 million items stored in 'the stacks', which means I can't just go pull something off the shelves like a normal library. Instead, I order the books I need to any particular reading room (of which there are many) and they will be delivered to the counter in a few hours. My favorite room is, I think, the lower Reading Room in the Radcliffe Camera. It's a lovely round building with arched ceilings and a very 'study-ish' feeling.

*Have you gone on any adventures to famous places?*

I have been to London twice (once to see James Earl Jones in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof!*) and to Blenheim Palace grounds. Blenheim was definitely my favorite trip so far. We walked around the grounds all day. It is probably the most beautiful place I've ever been to. Every tree and lake and field were designed specifically for the Duke of Marlborough (a major war hero) in the 18th century.

*Do you have a British accent yet?*

I can do a decent fake, I think! Whenever I read, the voice in my head is British, and particularly when we're singing in church, it's hard not to slip into a British accent, surrounded as I am by English people!

*How do you see this experience affecting your future plans?*

Oxford has really pushed me more towards pursuing a career in publishing. I love looking at how stories are put together, and my primary tutorial has definitely encouraged that. Also, the SCIO staff have great connections, and I mentioned my interest in publishing to Dr. Baigent, our academic dean, who passed my name on to a professor at Brookes University, which has one of the most internationally acclaimed masters programs in publishing. I'm meeting with her on Friday to talk publishing.

Also, Oxford is teaching me that I can combine a practical and academic career. Publishing is much more practical than doing an MFA or PhD, but lots of people here combine their interests. I would love to pursue something in children's literature, whether in publishing or academia. Both are possible!





## Persuasion: CCC Sessions By the Writing Center Tutors



Writing Center tutor Gillian Smith works with students at a CCC session

Photo: Alyssa Lord

*“Expecting ourselves to always be ready for what’s next seems a bit unrealistic and perhaps unhealthy.”*

### **Alyssa:**

This Spring the Writing Center was asked to become a part of the Created and Called for Community program by helping first-year students prepare for their persuasive essay on... you guessed it... community! In order to encourage inner-dorm community, tutors arranged sessions in each first-year building: Hess, Naugle and Witmer. Monday night, tutors led a teaching session on how to write a persuasive paper and on Wednesday

night, tutors facilitated peer-review sessions.

### **Kinley:**

Five curious first-year students joined Writing Center staff in the lobby of Witmer for discussion on writing persuasive essays. I was able to share suggestions and tips for the organization, structure, and stylistic concerns of argumentative writing. A highlight was talking about the opportunities for creativity the paper offered (not

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## On Looking Back... and Forward By Betsy Bunt

How many times have you been asked the question “Are you ready to graduate?” If you are anything like I was my senior year at Messiah (which was two years ago now), you are likely experiencing a multitude of emotions: excitement about moving on and living in the real world (perhaps euphoria), dread about leaving behind good friends, nervousness about finding a job or perhaps beginning graduate school, or maybe even fear of not meeting your own expectations.

As I look back on the whole graduation experience from Messiah, I realize that I simultaneously felt ready to move forward and afraid that I was not actually ready to do so. Now two years later, I am graduating from University

of Pittsburgh with my Master in Social Work degree and am experiencing those same worries about being “ready.” Since I went directly from Messiah to grad school, I did not have to deal with the immediate concern of finding a full time job because my plan was to continue being a full time student; I took some level of comfort in knowing that I had two more years as a student to get myself together before entering into the real world. As I look toward completing grad school in three weeks, I feel that I’m asking myself even bigger questions concerning readiness: Am I ready to finish school for good? Am I ready to leave a city that I have learned to love over the past two years? Am I ready to find a full time job? Am I ready to get married?

And I wonder what being “ready” actually means and how to recognize when one is “ready”. It seems like readiness refers to having some semblance of a plan for the future or at least feeling emotionally prepared to move forward. It seems that we are almost expected to answer that we are ready to move forward, to start anew. Expecting ourselves to always be ready for what’s next seems a bit unrealistic and perhaps unhealthy. If we’re always looking toward what’s coming next, we may be missing out on the “now” and in doing so may actually be limiting our future readiness, personally, vocationally, and spiritually.

Before you can start looking ahead to the future and pre-

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Betsy Bunt

*“this session was a good resource for students struggling to come up with ways in which to outline this seemingly inaccessible assignment.”*



Photo: Kinley Zook

## Readiness Continued from pg. 4

paring for life after college, it's important to acknowledge the present; before you can “ready” yourself for what's next, it's important to savor the present moment, appreciating the person you are now, the friends you have surrounding you, and the little life giving moments in each day. At least for today, try to be completely accepting of where you are as a hu-

man being, focusing your energy on living for today rather than planning for tomorrow. God certainly sees us and loves us for who we are right now and where we genuinely are in our lives; try practicing that same grace with yourself, give yourself permission to not be or feel ready if that's where you are right now. Practicing awareness and acceptance of where you are

in your life now is a good first step to getting ready for the future.

*Betsy Bunt graduated from Messiah College in 2009. She will graduate this spring with her Masters in Social Work from the University of Pittsburgh. She plans to pursue a social work career in mental health and eating disorder counseling.*

## Persuasion: CCC Sessions Continued from pg. 4

only in topic, but also in presentation). Students' papers vary so greatly in subject matter; truly “community” is a larger concept than the average person recognizes.

### John:

Our session was an overall success. The turnout was higher than expected with a maximum attendance of eleven students— we only expected about four or five students! We found it easy to communicate the standard layout of a persuasive essay mostly because of our use of visual aids and creative argument examples. Having one of the CCC professors in attendance was

also helpful because he was able to elaborate on the requirements of the assignment. I thought that this session was a good resource for students struggling to come up with ways in which to outline this seemingly inaccessible assignment. I would certainly lead another session like this next year.

### Emily:

Karl and I had a casual conversation with about 5 students about their writing. We made sure to cover the basic points of persuasion and to show concrete examples, but we let their questions direct us. They had concerns about their potential theses and topics, and we helped them work

out ways to specify and narrow both. We encouraged them to be sure their topic could be argued against, and then refute those arguments.

### Callie:

I met with only one student but we had a good conversation about his paper. He was very passionate about his topic but was having difficulty developing a strong, clear argument. I mainly just listened to him think his ideas aloud, then encouraged him to write them down. His speech about the topic was so eloquent and passionate; he really just needed to figure out how to translate that to the page.

## The Perfect Prompt Continued from Pg. 2

this be accomplished in 4-5 pages? Are there any limitations to topic? How much more of the paper should be opinion versus research?

These questions should at least be addressed in class but in an ideal prompt sce-

nario everything should already be answered. The perfect prompt describes the assignment concisely and clearly states the objective for the paper. At the same time, it should give students some direction or let them know (literally) that they may pur-

sue whatever their own topic of interest. Students often feel less comfortable with this type of less-directive prompt so do more discussion about it in class to make sure the students feel capable and comfortable branching out on their own.

# Editorial

By Emily Williams

Nothing is worse for a tutor than the moment when she splutters to the realization that her explanation is confusing rather than helping her peer. While we as tutors are peer authorities, we are also learning and developing new methods of explaining writing to others. Each new client that comes in brings different personality and style, and we must adapt our discussion to suit him as best we can. Sometimes our methods seem to fall flat, and we have to try to learn what to do for next time.

In this, my third year of tutoring at the Writing Center, I've begun to be more introspective about my process of tutoring. The most challenging sessions are often those when I find a creative way to explain a concept, but the client doesn't understand—or care about—my explanation. I have

been learning to step back focus on what the client needs to better understand the process of writing, not what impresses me as being important. It takes humility to listen and put the client's needs first.

However, I am still to be in charge of the session, guiding the student away from faulty assumptions or poor writing habits. There is a difficult balance to maintain between admitting my own inadequacies (or areas that could use improvement) and confidently discussing the client's paper. I must mold my methods, reacting to the needs of each new student without letting go of my authority as the tutor, the one there to assist with the writing process.

The non-directive approach that the Writing Center favors helps with this dilemma. When I ques-

tion the client about her paper I give her the opportunity to show me areas where she is unsure or sections that she needs to vocalize. I can better shape my methods to her concerns when I draw her into the process of analyzing her paper. And while she thinks about her paper, I have extra time to consider my approach. Above all, I must remind myself to keep reevaluating, to constantly stretch myself as a tutor to meet the variety of needs that clients bring.



Emily Williams

## The Writing Center

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The Writing Center Staff outside Hoffman, Spring 2010

Feel free to contact us with questions or comments, or just drop by, we'd be happy to chat.