

Genre Guide Project Summer 2009 (and beyond)

Below are passages from the Pew Faculty Teaching & Learning Center Presidential Teaching Initiatives grant application that was submitted by Ellen Schendel, Associate Professor of Writing & Director of the Fred Meijer Center for Writing. A quick perusal of this document should give readers a sense of the project's goals, as well as how the guides are used in our writing center.

If you have questions about the project or are a faculty member who would like to collaborate with the writing center to produce a genre guide, please contact Ellen Schendel at 331-2922 or schendee@gvsu.edu.

Project Objectives:

There were several important objectives for this project:

- To foster meaningful conversation between faculty who assign writing projects in their classes and the writing center.
- To clarify for the writing center the disciplinary expectations and conventions that should be the focus of writing consultations with student-writers from various disciplines.
- To clarify for faculty participants how the writing center can assist their students with writing assignments.
- To devise appropriate materials to be used in consultations with students from the units whose faculty participate in the project.
- To build a resource library (accessible in the writing center's various locations and online) organized by discipline that students, faculty, and writing consultants can access as needed.
- To initiate in a focused way, and over a short period of time, a process that the writing center can use in continuing to work with units across campus to develop materials for use in writing consultations and staff training. This summer project will enable us to make significant progress toward compiling a resource library and writing guides in the disciplines from which we see many student-writers. After this summertime project, we hope to have gained experience and refined a process that enables us to collaborate effectively and efficiently with additional faculty in other disciplines across the university.

Definition of the Problem:

The Fred Meijer Center for Writing employs approximately 55 undergraduate and graduate peer writing consultants at our various locations in Allendale, at the Pew campus, in the CHS building, and at the Meijer campus in Holland. Writing consultants work with students across the university on a wide variety of writing assignments and at any stage of students' writing processes. Our mission is to provide student-writers with personalized writing consultations that help students to better understand how they might approach revisions of their projects. To this end, writing consultants are trained to ask many questions of the

writer about the assignment at hand, the disciplinary features of the writing, the audience's expectations, the purpose of the writing, and the writer's process in producing the piece. The guiding idea is that by helping writers to think metacognitively about their writing, providing the writer with an interested reader's experience in navigating the text, and modeling writing strategies to aid in revision, consultants can help writers identify the ways in which the text "works" or needs revision.

Our assessments indicate that the writing center achieves our mission of helping writers help themselves. During the 2007-2008 academic year, 99.5% of students asked whether "today's consultation was helpful to you and your writing" answered that the sessions were "very helpful" (86.5%) or "somewhat helpful." (13%). These students sometimes indicated in their discursive comments that they wish they'd gotten more discipline-specific help with their writing. Other data show that writing center consultants empower writers, helping them to feel more confident about their ability to complete the writing task at hand. This kind of self-efficacy is key to becoming a more successful writer. And a pedagogical function of the writing center is to help students devise a plan for revision; all students leaving the center document their revision plans in at our checkout kiosk.

So we know the writing center is doing a lot of good for writers. However, a challenge for any writing center staffed by peer consultants is to provide effective support to writers from upper-level courses in disciplines outside the consultants' own areas of expertise. While some scholars have pointed out that in these circumstances the consulting is more "pure"—the writer is the expert, and the writing consultant is there to ask questions and describe how the writing seems to be organized and functioning—others have argued that some students arrive in the writing center with vague directives from their instructor, or very little experience in writing for that particular disciplinary audience. These students need more direction from the writing center; indirective methods of tutoring can leave the writer—and the tutor—dissatisfied with the consultation and longing for more substance. Even directive methods of tutoring can be less satisfying if they don't happen within a shared understanding of the disciplinary writing context.

We in the writing center think it would be helpful to partner with faculty from across the university to devise "consulting guides" for the common genres (or forms of writing) within each discipline—guides that can be used as agendas for consultations in which the consultant is not majoring in the same discipline as the student. These guides, made available in the writing center's various locations and on our website, would be important writing resources for students and also would serve as training resources for tutors. Importantly, because the guides will be constructed in collaboration with faculty in the disciplines and vetted with the faculty in those units, they will function as officially sanctioned descriptions of faculty expectations for writing.

In other words, in addition to serving as educational guides for students and writing consultants alike, the genre guides will ensure that the writing center and the departments who send students our way will have a "meeting of the minds" about how writing consultants and student-writers might best spend their time together. These guides will be one way for the writing center to achieve an important strategic planning goal: to provide better, more effective support to students writing in the disciplines.

Plans for implementing project, evaluating it, and disseminating knowledge gained:

Ahead of our first meeting in May, faculty participants will be asked to collect sample assignment sheets, sample student writing, departmental writing guides, assessment data-- anything that helps them to paint for us a portrait of student writing in that discipline. Beginning in May, Ellen Schendel and the two writing consultants tapped to participate in this project, Michelle Sanchez and Shay Munn, will meet individually (or in pairs, in the case of disciplines with two faculty members involved in this project) to interview faculty about their students' writing and the expectations of writing in that discipline and to collect writing-related documents that the faculty participants have collected. These discussions will be recorded, and/or extensive notes will be taken.

Time spent in these meetings will be spent determining the main genres (or forms) of writing that students are asked to produce in courses throughout that major: case study reports, lab reports, literature reviews, arguments, poems, proposals, etc., and how writing consultants might best support the writing of students in those disciplines. After each meeting, Ellen Schendel and the writing consultants will begin developing a writing guide that educates writing consultants about that genre/form of writing: what its purposes are, what features are most important, what writing strategies will be most successful, what consulting strategies should be used, and what resources should be consulted. An undergraduate student majoring in Professional Writing will consult with us in the design and production of the documents. Throughout the process of writing and revising the guides, faculty participants will be consulted for feedback. Faculty participants will also help to construct appropriate ancillary materials that will enable students and consultants using the guide to better understand writing in the field, such as annotated model papers, style sheets, or links to disciplinary writing information on the web. In the early fall, faculty participants will make the guides available to their colleagues for further feedback and, depending on the unit, more formal approval.

Throughout the 2009-2010 academic year and beyond, consultants will use the guides as they work with students in the disciplines. The guides will additionally be used in training activities and in the WRT 306: Seminar for New Writing Consultants course that all consultants are required to complete in their first semester of employment by the writing center. Guides will be made available in print form in every writing center location. We will upload the guides in PDF format to the writing center's website, too. Faculty in the disciplines may find other uses for the guides, perhaps incorporating them into their teaching or making them available on their Blackboard course sites and/or departmental websites.

To assess the effectiveness of the guides in the writing center's work with students, we will add to the center's check-out system a short electronic survey targeted at students who use the guides in their consultations. The point of this survey will be to assess students' sense of the guides' usefulness as well as to determine how the guides were used in the consultations. We will solicit the feedback of faculty participating on our project at the end of the year to find out whether they think the guides have made a difference in their students' visits to the writing center, and in students' writing. In addition, Ellen Schendel will observe a number of writing consultations in which the guides are used to better understand how consultants and students use the documents, and to assess whether further documents or revisions of the guides are in order.

The documents produced through this project will be shared with a number of audiences and used to facilitate teaching and learning in a variety of ways. Most important to this project is that the writing guides will become a major part of the writing consultants' training. Ellen Schendel, Shay Munn, and Michelle Sanchez will share the guides with the full writing center staff at our August staff meeting and facilitate a workshop focused on how to use them in consultations with students across the university. The guides will provide learning/discussion material for the fall sections of WRT 306: Seminar for New Writing Consultants. Further, the guides will be available to the faculty and departments who have participated in this project; they may discover classroom or extra-curricular uses for the documents that serve their students' needs. The writing center will additionally make the guides available to faculty teaching WRT 305: Writing in the Disciplines, who help students to manage writing in various genres across the university. Finally, we will share with our colleagues at the Michigan Writing Centers Association conference in October 2009 the process we underwent to produce these guides. We anticipate that this focused work over the summer will enable us to institute and refine a process we can use throughout the academic year to develop additional consulting guides with other faculty across the university.