

The Dangling Modifier

Volume 8 Number 1 A national newsletter by and for peer tutors in writing, produced in association with the NCPTW Fall Issue 2001

Mission Statement

The mission statement of *The Dangling Modifier* is to provide a national forum for ongoing conversation among peer tutors in writing. *The Dangling Modifier* is designed to stimulate discussion, promote national peer tutor activities, and share helpful information among writing centers across the nation. The editorial staff strives to select pieces that are interesting, controversial, original and well-written.

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At the Center of the 2001 NCPTW

By Alex Doehrer and Maggie Herb, Writing Tutors at The Pennsylvania State University

The 18th Annual National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing was held this year on November 2-4, at Muhlenberg College in Allentown, Pennsylvania.

Tutors, directors, writers and teachers from across the country came together to make the weekend, full of discussions, presentations and collaboration, a rousing success.

With an overall theme of “Writing from the Center,” the conference gave attendees the opportunity to participate in a variety of discussions regarding the different ways, both literal and figurative, that writing serves as our “center.”

The conference offered over sixty presentations, with topics ranging from tutoring reluctant writers to issues of authorship to a writing center’s atmosphere, giving attendees a wide array of choices to explore.

Some presentations were full, allowing presenters to share their expertise with many; others attracted smaller numbers, giving both presenters and audiences the opportunity for small-group discussions and collaboration. No matter what format or topic attendees preferred, a presentation was certain to suit their interests.

A high point for many was the Saturday afternoon keynote address by Scott Russell Sanders, noted essayist, author and Distinguished Professor of English at Indiana University. After Saturday afternoon’s presentations ended, attendees came together in Egner Chapel to listen to Sanders (whose metaphor “writing from the center” provided the theme for the conference) speak about his own writing processes which help him to explore the evolution of memories and perception. In the talk, entitled “Wild Words,” Sanders shared personal stories and gave examples from his own work to illustrate his thoughts on the writing process.

In addition to the consideration that went into the keynote speaker and the numerous presentations, conference planners also ensured that participants had opportunities to socialize with peers and colleagues. Friday evening’s gathering in The Hoffman House offered beverages and snacks while participants registered and mingled; Saturday evening featured a buffet dinner, a live jazz quartet and a book fair, featuring work by Sanders and a number of other writing references and resource books.

Thanks to all—planners, organizers, presenters and participants—who made this year’s conference so rewarding and enjoyable. We hope to see you all next year in Kansas! X

From *The Dangling Modifier* Staff:

Dear Readers,
We would like to welcome you to the first ever online issue of *The Dangling Modifier*! Although our format has changed, our mission to provide a national forum for peer tutors in writing remains the same. Featured in this issue are perspectives from attendees of the 2001 NCPTW, as well as several articles dealing with the different roles we take on as tutors. We hope that our new online format will encourage more reader feedback and interaction, so your reactions to each issue are more than welcome. What did you like about the 2001 NCPTW? Does your writing center have a mascot? How do you see your role as a tutor? We can’t wait to hear from you!

NCPTW: Idealism in Action

By Rose Hurder, Writing Center Tutor
at Millsaps College, Jackson, Mississippi

Three days. Thirteen hours. That was all the time I spent at the 2001 National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing. Yet rarely do I get as much out of a semester of school as I did from this one conference. It's hard to adequately describe what exactly made the conference so exceptional. I enjoyed presenting. I enjoyed the exchange of ideas that occurred in all of the sessions. I even enjoyed the food. Yet there was more to the weekend than any of these aspects. What truly made this conference special was the sense of community that immediately enveloped us all. We were idealists united by the thrill of participating in something we could be proud of.

I have decided that writing centers are utopian ideas put into action. Where else is something so egalitarian as a writing center? Or are people as respectful of one another's ideas? And, based on

**"I have decided
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everything I have seen, these ideals work. I could see this zeal that comes from knowing you are a part of something good on countless faces. Why else would Ron Maxwell, the former director of the Penn State Writing Center, come back to these conferences year after year, even in his retirement? Or Monica Stuft forego sessions to taxi us to and from the hotel? Their amazing dedication reflects the way I feel about writing centers.

Before this conference, I did not realize why I enjoyed tutoring so much. Yet the more people I met, the more I began to understand. Nobody I met had a negative attitude. The exchange of ideas taking place was phenomenal. We were not competing; we were working together. And I kept meeting people who loved what they did. This conference demonstrated what makes writing centers so special. It brought together a group of people who love their jobs because they understand what it means to help others in a way that promotes individuality, equality, and the most powerful form of communication. Not bad for a weekend event. X

2001 Ron Maxwell Award Winner

By Alex Doehrer

Congratulations to Dr. Kevin Davis, the Writing Center director at East Central University in Oklahoma, for winning the Ron Maxwell Award at the 2001 NCPTW, with its theme "Writing from the Center". "Whatever I write—essays, poetry, scholarship—I spin off of my personal experience to try to create a larger meaning which extends to the reader," said Dr. Davis, the director of the East Central University Writing Center since 1987. "A good day is when I go to the Writing Center by choice, not by necessity. A good day is when I get lots of phone calls with questions but none with urgent requests. A good day is when the tutors are running the show and I'm just the resource guy who works in the background."

The NCPTW Ron Maxwell Award, which is endowed by Ron and Mary Maxwell and includes a plaque and a modest cash prize for the recipient, is awarded for distinguished leadership in promoting the collaborative learning practices of peer tutoring in writing. Dr. Davis has "always had a clear vision of what this conference is and can be," said Jean Kiedaisch, Director of the Academic Support Programs at University of Vermont and the 2000 Ron Maxwell Award Winner.

Dr. Davis has been married to his "college sweetheart and good friend," Annie, for twenty-eight years. He has two children: Kirsten, a manager for the Oregon State University book store, and Nathan, "who recently retired from a lucrative insurance career to return to college in hopes of fulfilling his childhood dream of becoming a doctor," said Dr. Davis. At some point, each of them worked for him as peer tutors.

Described by one nominator as "fair-minded and honest", Davis received his B.A. and M.A. degrees from Southeast Missouri State and his Ph.D. in composition and rhetoric from Indiana University of Pennsylvania. He hosted the NCPTW in 1995 and 1996.

"Ron Maxwell is the person I want to be when I grow up," said Dr. Davis. "His quiet demeanor and his calm, easy-going control are all things I wish I was better at. To receive an award named after him is an honor which I really don't feel worthy of." X



Not Just Talking: Opportunities for Learning and Change

By Scott Johnston, Director of Composition at State University of New York at Fredonia

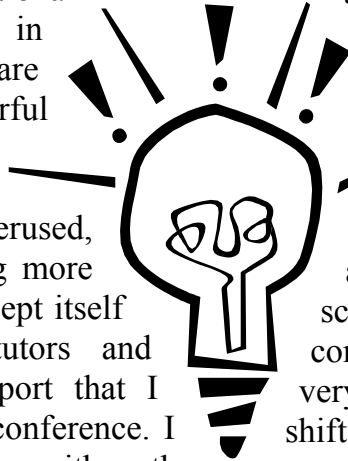
Listening to "Partnership with Struggling Writers: Case Studies," given by three undergraduate presenters after my own talk, I was reminded why The National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing is not only a place to share our research, but also a powerful vehicle for genuine change in the academe. The term "life-long learner" has become so overused, it is nearly meaningless, nothing more than a cliché. However, the concept itself is imperative for effective tutors and teachers, and I am glad to report that I learned a great deal during the conference. I was particularly impressed with the undergraduate tutors' insights and ideas, as well as their enthusiasm and dedication. For instance, Anne Schober demonstrated how she responds to students' writing using sticky notes rather than writing on the papers themselves. She does this because her students had explained how their writing felt like it became the teacher's writing when the teacher wrote in the margins. After more than fifteen years working in writing centers, I had never heard this suggested, though it is clearly an effective method for maintaining student ownership.

Currently, I am the Director of Composition at SUNY Fredonia, and in this capacity, I often share ideas for the instructors to consider. The day after I returned from the conference, I posted the idea on our composition listserv. A number of instructors have already adopted it, and others tell me they are going to experiment with it. Clearly, this constitutes change that will positively affect many students for years to come.

During the final of the three presentations, it suddenly dawned on me that each of the case studies the tutors so eloquently described, as well

as the research I have conducted, had a fundamental similarity that was applicable to writers at all levels of education. In fact, I suspect this similarity may well be the most essential element in the success or failure students have with their writing. It is simply this: typical students, at most levels of education, do not see themselves as writers, regardless of the quality and quantity of the writing they do in school. Ironically, I also know from my research and experience in schools that students in kindergarten often consider themselves writers. Though I would be very interested in exploring the reasons why this shift in perception occurs, I decided it would be equally worthwhile to begin researching to what extent students at my institution conceive of themselves as writers and how this may influence the way in which they write and the quality of the work they produce. I have already created and distributed a writing attitudes survey to several English classes and plan to have students from courses all over the college take it next semester. Hopefully I will be sharing this information, along with some implications for tutoring and teaching writing, at next year's NCPTW.

If Kenneth Bruffee and L.S. Vygotsky are correct when they argue that we think in ways that we learn to talk, and that all talking begins with social interaction, then conferences like the NCPTW are crucial for tutors, teachers, and the students with whom we engage in conversation. As long as we continue to talk with one another, share our ideas, and then incorporate what we learn in our own tutoring and training, we will truly be life-long learners. X



Making Connections

By Lee Ann Diffendal, Peer Tutor in Writing at University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown

When I first became a peer tutor, I remember being anxious about whether I could aptly criticize a peer's work and assume a teacher-like position. In actuality, my concerns were a result of having a vague understanding of what constitutes a tutor's role—something that is imperative for tutors to know.

Originally, I assumed a tutor's role was to serve as a replacement professor who has the ability to break lectures down to a level any writer can comprehend. Truthfully, a peer tutor does not act in lieu of a professor nor should a tutoring session function as a make-up class for the student. Rather, a student should consult a tutor to gain assistance with his or her writing after the student has already attempted to understand the material on his or her own. As a writing tutor, I have encountered students who exhibit a below average writing level, and they unrealistically expect me to transform them into an author of Hemingway's caliber in a twenty minute session.

“A tutoring session is a constant give and take process in which no hierarchy of power should occur.”

Other students have given me their papers to review for grammatical errors.

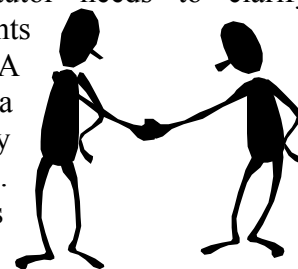
Yet we must be mindful that a peer tutor cannot turn an “F” paper into an “A” paper. A writing tutor does not necessarily construct well-written papers by writing students' thesis statements or developing main points for them. Instead, a tutor should help his or her students to improve their understanding of issues involved in writing, such as developing a thesis statement or creating transitions, and then encourage them to apply this knowledge on their own.

In addition, students should not expect a writing tutor to simply proofread or edit their papers. In fact, tutors should initially discuss other aspects, including the organization and structure of papers with their students, rather than grammar. After all, one must

build the foundation of a house before painting it. Just as students need to recognize they are responsible for their own academic performance, the tutor should help the student to gain a crystal clear understanding of this relationship. A tutor and a writer have a reciprocal relationship; a tutoring session is a constant give and take process in which no hierarchy of power should occur—an even playing field between two peers.

Another difficulty I have experienced concerns maintaining a professional relationship with students outside of tutoring sessions. For instance, if I would see a tutee I had worked with at a social gathering, I would feel compelled to approach him or her because I felt we had formed a bond during our sessions. However, when one of the students began procrastinating in writing a paper until she had first consulted me, I learned that tutoring does not necessarily equal bonding. A student can easily become dependent on a tutor, and this dependency can hinder a student's learning process. I now take this belief seriously, as I will go so far as to decline offers from a student to get together outside of a tutoring session.

Consequently, I have learned that a fine line exists between tutors and writers during a tutorial. The session should not resemble a class in which one will find a distinct separation of power between an authoritarian teacher and a subordinate student. However, when students begin to take advantage of this mutual situation, the tutor needs to clarify boundaries that both the students and the tutor should respect. A tutor is analogous to a consultant and not necessarily a friend or a comfort zone. The foremost role a tutor plays is one of many academic resources a student may utilize to gain a better understanding of certain material. X



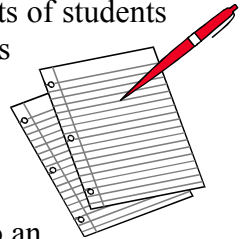
A SERVICE TO STUDENTS, A SERVICE TO MYSELF

BY JESSICA TRENCHICK, PEER WRITING CONSULTANT AT COLUMBUS STATE UNIVERSITY

I live for clothes. If shopping is a sport, then I am a hunter. I would even major in pop culture if I could. So how do I relate my passion for trendiness to my undergrad studies in English? Well, when people ask me what I want to do when I grow up, I tell them, “I want to be editor of a magazine like Cosmo.” Relating this goal to my work as a peer writing consultant at the Columbus State University Writing Center might seem a bit more challenging, but these interests surprisingly complement each other quite well. Although I am a peer writing consultant, I also serve as an editor.

I use the word ‘editor’ in a broad sense: a person who reflects on a written piece as a whole and addresses its global issues by assessing its quality, not just a proofreader armed with a red pen. In my opinion, being a skilled editor means not only realizing when a particular piece needs improvement, but also acknowledging patterns of errors and

basis, I find myself praising the efforts of students in the Writing Center with comments such as, “I like this transition because it...” or “This is a strong conclusion because you...” I believe an understanding of coherent writing should be just as important to an editor as the ability to recognize mistakes.



This recent personal revelation has led me to value my work in the Writing Center as more than just a paycheck. Peer writing consultation does not just provide a service to my fellow students, but an advantage to myself as well. Our own writing center has a slogan we include in all of our advertising: “Better writers make better papers.” In applying this motto to my goals, I feel that better peer writing consultants make better editors. X

“As students gain assistance with the writing process, I attain valuable experience as a critical reader.”

recognizing how to make the writing better. Every time I work in the Writing Center, I am helping people to discover weaknesses in their writing and to develop techniques enabling them to overcome these problems. After all, a successful editor needs to possess critical reading skills to effectively evaluate an article or paper.

Through my discourse with the students who come into the Writing Center, I am constantly developing and refining my ability to read critically. And if one can define critical reading as the ability to not only recognize problems in writing, but also to understand what causes these errors and how to explain them to the writer, then I would argue that this definition could serve as my job description. Thus, with each student essay I read, I am one small step closer to my personal goal of becoming an editor.

Of course, this process works both ways. As I learn to recognize weaknesses in writing, I am also learning to recognize strengths. Almost on a daily

Want to See your Name in Lights?

Okay, how about in print?

If you have an article on writing or tutoring and you would like the opportunity to see it published, send it to us!

Send submissions to: danglingmodifier@psu.edu

Or

The Dangling Modifier
The Center for Excellence in Writing
Penn State University
206 Boucke Building
University Park, PA, 16802

Learning Not to Be the Boss

By Mercy Greenwald, Writing Consultant at Coe College, Grand Rapids, Iowa

I can still distinctly remember my first shift at the Writing Center. Torrents of questions filled my head. “What do I do if I get a conference?” “What am I going to say?” “What am I going to do?” “What happens if everyone thinks I’m a total fraud?”

Needless to say, I was a bit nervous. Fortunately I had my first conference with a fellow consultant. We reviewed a paper for her art appreciation seminar. Even though I cannot remember anything we discussed during the entire conference, I can recall that when the conference ended I thought to myself, “Hey, that wasn’t too bad. Maybe I can actually do this.” After conferencing hundreds of times, I would like to think I am a little better now in handling these sessions. Although I am not really sure if I have improved much since that first conference, I do understand that the process of learning how to conference is something that continually changes and grows with me. Collaborating with writers is an evolutionary process that is full of challenges and learning experiences. There is no “perfect” way to do a conference, and there is no such thing as getting so good at conferencing that no more room exists for improvement. This is probably the most important element of conferencing I have learned since I started working here three years ago, and I think this realization has contributed to my evolution as a consultant.

When I read through the database, looking over all the different conferences in which I have participated during my time here, I could easily discern between the conferences I had my first year and the ones I have had more recently. During my first year, I felt uncertain about how I should initiate a discussion. I tended to package my conferences for the first few weeks by using a recurrent pattern of semi-small talk, discussion of the paper, finding errors, discussing them, and saying goodbye. As I became more comfortable with conferencing, I also became more assertive. I went into more depth with ideas and concepts, and writers often responded positively to this change.

In the latter part of my first year in the Writing Center, I became aware that I served a real purpose in conferences. I realized that I function as a ‘positive reinforcer’ for the writers. During the spring term of my first year, I worked individually with two different

first year students who were in the same English class. They were both really dissatisfied with the course and were getting grades that



did not please them. Their generally positive attitudes instantly changed the moment they started talking about their writing in this class. They felt frustrated and angry about their writing and the way in which the professor perceived their writing abilities. We worked together for the majority of the semester, and by the end of the year their grades had improved immensely. At first, I thought that this boost in grades occurred because I had helped them learn how to write better papers. However, the more I think about it, the more I realize these students achieved higher grades because of our combined efforts.

My purpose in helping those students mainly involved giving them the chance to trust in their own abilities, rather than imparting any sort of knowledge on them that they did not already have. I serve in multiple roles as a soundboard, a counselor, and a support system for these students, and for any student who visits. I do not teach the people who seek assistance with their papers, but rather learn from them. My desire to learn from the writer who I conference helps the individual improve his or her writing; every writing consultant should foster confidence in writing. As consultants, we can correct grammar or fix mistakes, but these actions will only change a few papers and will never actually improve the writer’s skills.

Reflecting on my past three years of working in the Writing Center has given me the ability to really analyze and understand the ways in which I work with a writer who requests help with a paper. We need to understand, as writing consultants, that much of what we do is centered in validation. We help people to recognize that they already possess the ability to write well. Although we can help writers with some of the formalities and support them in any way they need, they are the only ones who have the necessary element of any good paper—a story. I think our job can be much easier than we think, but the hardest part concerns making *ourselves* aware of this. Gaining that understanding has changed the way I have conferenced between my freshman and senior years. X

The Need For Mascots in Writing Centers

By Aaron Rider, Peer Tutor at Pittsburg State Writing Center, Pittsburg, Kansas



Mascots are an essential part of any organization. They help to create a group identity and to promote public recognition. At the Pittsburg State Writing Center, we rely on meerkats to bring us together as a working team. I think that adopting a mascot is very appropriate for many different reasons, such as motivating people to do their best and providing unity in a group.

We searched far and wide to find the meerkat. This animal lives in the southern part of Africa, which consists mostly of the Kalahari Desert. With the exception of their black-banded eyes, adult meerkats closely resemble Prairie Dogs with their shorts legs and long, thin bodies.

The Smithsonian poster that graces one of our walls states that the meerkat's "survival depends on their incredibly communal society." In addition, meerkats are extremely sociable, much like the tutors in our writing center. We not only want to help our fellow comrades by reading their papers and expressing new ideas, but we also strive to create comfortable, casual friendships that extend beyond the walls of our writing center.

Another way in which our writing center relates to a group of meerkats concerns how meerkats band together to create more protection in times of danger or trouble. By banding together, meerkats have the increased ability to thwart dangerous predators. During busy times in the Writing Center, a tutor who is studying or sitting in the hall will chip in and help those tutors who are currently working. While we do not scare away our visitors, we do band together to create unity and defuse a difficult situation.

One final characteristic our writing center has in common with a group of meerkats focuses on how an older one will help to raise the young by helping them forage for food and watching for danger. Our director, Professor John Franklin, is much like this elder meerkat. He takes on the responsibility of training new tutors in making sure they are prepared to give writers the best advice they possibly can. He has reassured us many times that if we have a problem we cannot solve, we should just let him know, and he will assist us with it. This mutual cooperation enables our writing center to run smoothly.

Overall, I think tutors and professors should consider the benefits of incorporating a mascot into their writing centers. A common mascot helps to promote unity and to maintain a stronger focus on our goals as tutors. I highly encourage any writing center that does not already have a mascot, emblem, or logo to consider adopting one. X

What's in a Name? You Tell Us!

What is meant by the name "Dangling Modifier"? The philosophy behind the newsletter's name, which was originally created by students, is quite fascinating. Although the name implies a grammatical concept, it actually serves a deeper and more meaningful literary purpose. Interestingly, "dangling" originally referred to the students' roles in the university's hierarchy, as they were only part of the university for a short while in relation to the faculty and staff. "Modifier" referred to the students' willingness to modify other students' writing. Thus, the name was deemed suitable for its audience—peer tutors—and its purpose—to promote discussion and collaboration among peer tutors in writing.

While the name's original meaning may have appeared somewhat clever, some readers feel that the newsletter's name, *The Dangling Modifier*, should be revised, or ultimately eliminated. They feel as though the name represents a weak attempt at a literary pun, as well as an apparent focus on mechanics. How do you feel? We would love to hear some of your ideas. If you have any creative and appropriate suggestions for a newsletter name change, please contact us via mail or e-mail. We would certainly appreciate your responses!

Tutor Guru Says...



Experiencing any problems in peer tutoring or writing? Ask the Tutor Guru for help! Write to danglingmodifier@psu.edu The Guru is always ready and willing to share his esteemed and insightful perspectives

DEAR TUTOR GURU,

PERHAPS IT'S JUST ME, BUT I FEEL AS THOUGH MY TUTEES ARE SUFFERING FROM ACUTE TWO HEADS-FOUR EYES PERCEPTION DISORDER. WHENEVER I POSE A THOUGHT-PROVOKING QUESTION, THEY SIT THERE SILENTLY AND STARE AT ME AS IF I WAS A FACE OUT OF ONE OF THEIR BAD DREAMS. ARE THEY AFRAID TO ANSWER FOR FEAR OF BEING WRONG? DO THEY SIMPLY NOT KNOW THE ANSWER? OR AM I JUST ASKING THE WRONG QUESTIONS? WHATEVER THE PROBLEM MAY BE, I AM IN DIRE NEED OF HELP! I DON'T WANT TO ANSWER THE QUESTIONS FOR THEM, BUT I ALSO NO LONGER WANT TO ENDURE UNCOMFORTABLE SILENCES IN MY TUTORIALS. PLEASE HELP!

WILDA BEEST

Dear Tutor Guru,

I recently had the pleasure to tutor an adult student. The tutorial was somewhat of a success. However, I cannot forget the initial tailspin my mind went through when realizing I had to tutor an "adult" student. I instantaneously doubted my abilities. Thus, my confidence plummeted, and in turn, my assertive presence was non-existent. How do I prevent this from occurring again? This mindset nearly destroyed the tutorial's effectiveness and disrupted its momentum. Please send some brainpower my way!

Frazzled in PA

Dear Ms. Beest,

As long as you really don't have two heads and four eyes, have no fear! Your tutee probably perceives you as a more fearful figure: a figure of authority. As long as you ask specific questions that pertain to the paper and remain non-directive, you can never ask a wrong question. The key to this solution is peer rapport. If you make the tutee feel comfortable at the beginning of your tutorial, you need not worry about awkward silences—your tutee will be more than ready to answer any questions you present.

Yours truly,
Tutor Guru

Dear Frazzled,

Yes, having an older, perhaps wiser, tutee can be a bit intimidating, but you must remember that the adult is still a peer. As a peer tutor, your job is to create a peer relationship with other students—no matter how old they may be. Never forget that you are a trained helper in writing and that this student has come to you for help in writing, not lessons in life!

Yours truly,
Tutor Guru

The Dangling Doodlers' Page

Word Scramble

LARATCLOBIONO _____

GIDNALGN EIFORMID _____

FONERECNEC _____

MARGRAM _____

TRIGWIN SCORPSE _____

NIBGROSAMRITN _____

IVENIRSO _____

DEISA _____



Riddle

What is the longest word in the English language to have only one vowel?



Riddle

What English word consists of two letters, used three times each?

Cryptogram

Hint: Those are some fightin' words!

KAL BLR MF JMCAKMLAD

KANR KAL FTQDG

Clues: A=H, K=T, M=I

Stumped? Find the answers on our website.
http://www.ulc.psu.edu/Dangling_Modifier/answers.htm