Letter from the MSU Writing Center Director

In his recent book, *Why They Can't Write: Killing the Five-Paragraph Essay and Other Necessities*, author John Warner talks about the danger of training wheels. He bemoans the fact that he grew up when training wheels were the way to learn to ride: “Training wheels actually prevent young riders from practicing the most important skill for riding a bike: balance” (p. 3). Warner argues that students need an opportunity to flail and to fall in order to find their balance as writers. As we collaborate with undergraduate, graduate, and faculty writers, we celebrate those moments when we see writing happening through the flail, the fail, and then the moment of “I got it!”

In the following pages, we share with you spaces for flailing (then balancing!) graduate writers, lessons we learned with our Writing Across MSU STEM faculty partners (and how to apply to be a grant recipient next year), and stories of former tutors learning the importance of flailing in order to find balance in their professional worlds. As you read, know that we are committed to creating a culture of meaningful writing at MSU. Writing is happening here. We would love for you to join us!

Michelle Miley
Writing Center Director
Making Time: A Graduate Writing Retreat

Erin Strickland
Graduate Program Coordinator and Multilingual Writing Specialist

Seven humanities students participated in a writing retreat on February 22-23. By signing up for the retreat, these students committed to working on their writing for a Friday evening (from 5-8 p.m.) and all-day Saturday (9 a.m.-6 p.m.). Some worked on professional papers; others were drafting chapters of their dissertations or working on conference and symposium papers.

The Writing Center offered the retreat to encourage students to be proactive about one of the hardest aspects of working on a major writing project: making time for it. With work, classes, teaching, family, friends, and children, other obligations often take precedence.

Writing a large academic work can feel isolating. Two of the Writing Center’s core values are collaboration and community building, so when we bring writers together to write in the same space, they can talk to one another and share what they are working on. They also get immediate feedback on how readers interpret their texts.

Mary Murphy, a faculty member in the History Department, came and spoke about writing professionally as an academic. She talked about the importance of cultivating a research program, the process of writing and submitting to various publications, and the value of quality over quantity. Her perspective helped the students redefine how to think about being writers and scholars.

Altogether, the seven graduate students wrote over 14,000 words during the retreat! That 14,000 doesn’t even count the words they edited or rewrote. They participated in two tutoring sessions and reported drinking a total of 19 cups of coffee. When asked about the retreat one participant stated, “This was a great retreat that really got me thinking more about my writing process and ways that I can improve my own process to make my time more productive. I look forward to the next one!”

Writing is always an easy thing to do tomorrow. Let’s change that.

If you have graduate students who might benefit from a writing retreat or from another type of collaboration with the Writing Center, contact Erin Strickland at erin.strickland@montana.edu.
Lessons in Writing Pedagogy Across MSU

Aaron Yost
Assistant Director for Writing Across MSU

Our faculty partners care deeply about student learning. They’re working to be sure that students leave their courses with technical know-how and the writing acumen they’ll need to communicate their expertise to those inside and outside their fields. From Applied Chemistry to Database Management, we’re helping faculty navigate the complexities of writing education.

After a semester of new and continuing partnerships across MSU, we have learned a few things:

Process pays off.
When students write, they solidify, extend, and apply classroom concepts. Engaging students in a writing process beyond simply assigning and collecting work leads to better products and more learning. Professors report that when a student takes a paper through multiple drafts—especially with a Writing Center facilitator—the final products have more substance and are more effectively arranged.

Patience is (still) a virtue.
The results of writing instruction aren’t visible immediately. We’ve seen that writing instruction can’t be completed in a single semester, by a single instructor, or by a single department. Students need writing instruction from a variety of instructors, over a number of years, and in a variety of contexts to develop a truly well-rounded skillset.

We need to be teaching feedback skills.
One of the most powerful soft skills our graduates can cultivate is the ability to give effective feedback. We can teach this by demonstrating what feedback looks and sounds like and by giving it at a point in the process where students can put it to immediate use. Teaching feedback skills means slowing down and giving students time to rethink, revise, rework, and—ultimately—rewrite.

Interested in learning more? Join us at the Writing Across MSU (WAMSU) Showcase! (Pg.1) or contact our Assistant Director for Writing Across MSU (WAMSU), Aaron Yost, at aaron.yost@montana.edu!

Congratulations to our Spring 2019 Grant Winner!

Professor Charles McLaughlin is working to integrate a new writing component into his analytical chemistry (CHMY 311) curriculum. His assignment—an essay that asks students to write for a wide audience—aims to develop his students’ communication skills and prepare them for the writing they’ll do in their professional lives. This semester, McLaughlin’s students are meeting every few weeks in writing studio groups facilitated by Writing Center tutors as they work toward publishable drafts of their essays.

Call for Proposals: Integrating Writing into STEM Teaching Grants Program 2019-2020

The MSU Writing Center and Department of English, with funding from a private donor, welcome proposals for the Integrating Writing into STEM Teaching Grants Program. Grants of $6,000 each will be awarded to a maximum of four STEM faculty willing to integrate writing into their 200-400 level STEM courses. The deadline for proposal submission is April 30, 2019 at 5:00 p.m. An information session will be held on Tuesday, April 9, 11 a.m.-1 p.m., in the MSU Alumni Foundation Room.

The full Call for Proposals (CFP) for the Integrating Writing into STEM Grants and application procedures can be found at montana.edu/writingcenter/faculty_resources.html.

Questions should be directed to the Director of the Writing Center, Michelle Miley, at michelle.miley@montana.edu.

Charles McLaughlin
Chemistry and Biochemistry
Where Are They Now?

Every semester, Writing Center tutors devote hundreds of hours to working with writers and their writing. We know that tutors graduate with extensive practical and theoretical knowledge about language, learning, and collaboration. But, how do their experiences in the educational space of the writing center affect tutors’ post-graduate lives?

The more than 60 alums who have joined our tutor alumni network are following richly varied paths. Some are pursuing graduate degrees; some are pursuing careers in education—here or abroad; others are bringing their expertise to jobs in government, non-profit, business, or industry.

Sadie (Robertus) Barry ’16, is putting her Writing Center experience to work as a technical writer for Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) in New Mexico. Sadie spent five semesters working as a tutor in the Writing Center before graduating with a BA in English-Writing in 2016. In February, Sadie talked with us about the Writing Center’s impact on her current professional life.

Q: How would you describe your work at the LANL?

Sadie: I usually say that I’m a glorified grammar geek--I get paid to edit people’s papers. I also describe myself as a nerd interpreter; I translate documents written by engineers and scientists into English that people years later can read and understand.

Q: How did your experience as a Writing Center tutor factor into becoming employed by the LANL?

Sadie: I was hired by the LANL as a result of going to a career fair. Most booths are geared toward engineering majors, but most companies process a lot of documents, and they employ technical editors or copy editors to look them over. During the job interview, I talked a lot about working as a writing tutor. That same tutoring experience also helped me converse with interviewers in a comfortable and professional manner.

Q: How do you use the skills that you gained during your work as a tutor?

Sadie: The 45-minute sessions we had at the Writing Center taught me to prioritize my time. LANL editors serve a variety of customers from all over the Lab (LANL employs over 10,000 people); some customers don’t have the budget for a full edit, and some customers have a tight deadline and need the document back quickly. So, I need to decide the most important aspects of the document to focus on. Catching embarrassing grammar or factual errors and correcting the misuse of words are bigger priorities than defining every acronym or fixing clunky sentences.

Q: What was the most important thing you learned during your time as a tutor?

Sadie: Sometimes it’s easy to forget there is a person behind the product; someone has put in a lot of time writing something, and that piece of writing might be, in their eyes, a measure of their success as a student. Building relationships with my writers is important because more work can be done when there is mutual trust and respect. As I have transitioned from writing tutor to technical writer, building relationships remains just as important.

Q: Can you expand on how collaboration factors into your work as a technical writer?

Sadie: Our collaboration is not me saying, “You have to make this change” or the writer saying, “I disagree.” Sometimes the writer will accept part of my suggestion and add a much better revision to parts of the sentence or paragraph. One of my favorite responses from writers is when they actually reject my edit but explain more of the science about why they wrote the sentence that way. I appreciate these kinds of responses because they want to increase my technical knowledge so I can be a better editor, just as I explain some of my edits to help them become better communicators.