Getting it Off the Ground:  
A Look at the Wildcat Writing Center’s Inaugural Year

By Alison Grace

As a teacher who doesn't get a chance to write nearly as often as I'd like, I sometimes forget what a lonely experience writing can be when you're left with only the words on the page to keep you company and no one to talk to about them. That's why writing centers are so essential: all writers benefit from having someone to talk to about what they're doing, how it's working, and where it's going.

Naturally, most people feel more comfortable talking to someone about their writing who they perceive as non-judgmental and approachable because sharing work, especially in its early drafts, can be a scary thing. As much as it might sting for us to realize as teachers though, some of our students might not perceive us as the ideal non-judgmental, approachable helpers for their writing advice. Often, students are more apt to ask questions and get the help they need from each other, and it's this philosophy that drives a writing center, where students are trained to serve as peer tutors for their classmates.

This past school year, we began the Wildcat Writing Center, so named for our school mascot, at Centreville High School where I teach. While I'm by no means an expert, I have definitely learned a lot over the course of this school year. I'm hoping that those of you reading will learn from my process and be encouraged that the undertaking, though at times difficult, is definitely worth it.

The Beginning

Last year, Fairfax County Public Schools held a Writing Center Summit, and each school sent a few representatives. Writing centers, places where student tutors assist their peers with writing, have long been a staple at most universities, but many of those in attendance that day didn't know how this kind of thing could work at the high school level. After seeing presentations from Leigh Ryan, the writing center director at University of Maryland, and Amber Jensen, an English teacher and pioneer of the writing center at Edison High School, I was excited about the possibilities. In particular, hearing from Amber's student tutors about their positive experiences working in this leadership role was very intriguing. After the summit, most of the Fairfax County high schools began to seriously consider how they could start similar programs.

At the same time, I was taking a grad class with Terry Zawacki, the former longtime director of George Mason University's writing center. As part of the class, we were each asked to develop a theory-building project, something that deeply investigated an aspect of composition studies. Inspired by Amber's experience at Edison, I decided to do my project on high school writing centers. Reading up on the philosophy behind peer tutoring was incredibly helpful to my understanding of why writing centers are so important, and I became even more excited about being involved in a program like this at Centreville.

By the spring, we were (almost) officially in business: Centreville, like many other Fairfax
schools, was going to offer an advanced composition class for 2010-2011 school year, and the writing center would run as a part of the class. Around May, I learned that I was the one who would be teaching the class and putting this all together. Even though I was excited about the responsibility, I had no concept of how to organize everything, and I would be lying if I said I wasn't worried in the months leading up to September.

So what happened with all of those uncertainties, and how did we get started at Centreville? Rather than just recounting my whole story now, I thought it would be more helpful to organize this article into the things that need to be considered to establish and successfully run a writing center. Along the way, I'll fill in the gaps and tell you about our experiences. There are many things that I've figured out over the course of the school year from collaborating with other writing center directors, listening to my students, and simple trial-and-error. Some of these considerations may seem like no-brainers, others are obviously more complex, but all are extremely important.

**Space and Schedule**

Once you decide that you want a writing center at your school, you will need to figure out where to put it. Ideally, a large room is best, considering that you not only have to fit the tutors, but also all the students who will be coming in for help. You also want as centrally-located a room as possible so that it will be relatively easy for students to access. For some schools, including mine, the center is automatically housed in its director's normal classroom, but others have explored different spaces. You might consider using space in your school's media center, lecture hall, or larger double-classroom (for those schools with classrooms that have adjoining walls). Ideally, a room with round tables rather than desks allows students to meet together in a more casual manner, lessening the "I'm the authority, you're the student" vibe that the traditional classroom setting can sometimes communicate. Even if you don't get your dream space, don't despair. Amber pointed out that Edison's writing center has moved four times in four years, sometimes to less-than-ideal locations, but the students still came. Once they know it works, they'll come, wherever you are.

In order to ensure that they do come, you need to consider the times that your center will be available to students. Some schools have centers that operate strictly after-school, usually one day a week. In fact, this is what Edison did when they first began theirs, although they expanded to operating during the school day as well in their second year. Other schools have centers that run during the school day, either during the built-in remediation period, during a class period, or both.

At Centreville, our writing center is incorporated into the day as a part of the advanced composition class, an English elective open to all 10th, 11th and 12th grade students. Many other Fairfax schools have gone the same route. Our class meets during sixth period, which is a lunch period, and students are able to meet with a tutor while they eat. We've recently begun an after-school component too. Next year, we have plans to open during CATS time, (Centreville's built-in remediation period) to be even more accessible to students.

Obviously, each school needs to determine a schedule that will best fit its students' needs and utilize its available resources. If it's not possible to open a writing center during the school day or to make it a separate class like advanced composition, then beginning as an after-school organization can be an effective method for developing interest among the student body.

**Training and Recruitment**

Once you have the scheduling and location worked out, the next step is to consider how you will go about acquiring good tutors. Any director will tell you that staffing your center with responsible, enthusiastic, and hardworking kids is the most important ingredient to its success. Most schools, including mine, seek teacher input in its tutor selection. Ask your colleagues for recommendations of students who are not only good writers, but who also possess strong interpersonal skills; these need to be students who others will feel comfortable approaching for help. I would encourage asking not only English teachers, but teachers of all disciplines for these recommendations. This is something I didn't do this year, and I wish I had because I think it would have helped to communicate that the writing center is all-inclusive. This is an important message because too often writing centers can be wrongly viewed as an "English thing," but we all know that English isn't
the only class where students are writing. By enlisting help from teachers from all departments, you will get a much broader range of student tutors who are skilled in a variety of areas. When students come in to the center seeking help in assignments as diverse as college essays, history research papers, or resumes, it will be essential that the tutors have expertise in multiple areas.

After receiving student names, I sent letters to all who were nominated to explain that they'd been recommended as potential tutor candidates and to encourage them to formally apply. In order to be a tutor at Centreville, students must complete an application and get their English teacher to submit a brief recommendation form endorsing them. Again, this is a procedure followed at most of the high schools I'm familiar with. None of this is meant to be gate-keeping, but it is meant to show students that their role as a tutor is serious, requiring drive, responsibility, and genuine interest.

After you have a solid corps of students ready and willing to tutor, consider how you're going to get them ready to do this. Since none of my students had ever formally tutored before, I thought training was really important, and luckily, Anna Habib, George Mason University's writing center director, agreed. When I reached out to her, she graciously lent me the invaluable resources of two of the writing center's tutors to work with my kids. We spent a day observing sessions in Mason's writing center, another discussing tutoring basics, and a third hosting the Mason tutors at Centreville, so they could observe my students in mock-tutoring sessions and give them feedback.

We're lucky to be surrounded by a wealth of outstanding colleges and universities in this area, so if you are involved in setting up a writing center at your school, try to get in touch with the writing center directors at some of these schools. While it's certainly possible to train students yourself (Leigh Ryan's tutoring handbook, The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors is a staple and something that I used with my students) I think that having training from a neighboring university is an excellent experience.

**The writing center isn't a gimmick, it's an institution that we need to establish as part of the culture of our school**

As it turned out, the only thing missing was a steady stream of students. At times our numbers swelled, with so many students coming in for help that we didn't have enough tutors to accommodate them. Other days, the room was close to silent, as the tutors anxiously wondered if anyone was going to come. This created some high highs and some low lows, depending on the day. It also got me thinking about what we could do to raise our numbers and get more students to come in. I knew once they got there, they would have a great experience. The feedback we'd received from students who had come in was unfailingly positive, and I strongly believed in what we were doing.

I still do, but I have realized that developing anything worthwhile takes some time. The writing center isn't a gimmick, it's an institution that we need to establish as part of the culture of our school, and establishing a culture doesn't happen overnight, no matter how much I'd like it to. Bill McCabe, TC and the writing center director at Robinson High School, agrees. At Robinson, he says that the writing center has only gained a steady clientele in the last two months or so though they've been open for a year. He credits the increase with a combination of marketing, word of mouth, and directly approaching colleagues and encouraging them to open for business.

Since it was our first year, we spent the first quarter on training and waited until the beginning of November to officially open our doors. We felt ready.

To advertise, we presented a brief PowerPoint at the faculty meeting to explain our services and encourage teachers to send their students down. I brought all of my tutors so they could introduce themselves. We designed and ordered T-shirts to raise our tutors' visibility. We stuffed all the teachers' mailboxes with flyers advertising the writing center's services. We hung posters around the school, we put an announcement on Centreville's T.V. station, and we went into all of the English classes so our tutors could explain how the writing center worked.

We posted a sheet for students to sign-up for appointments. We created a cover sheet for them to fill out when they came in, explaining to their tutor what their assignment was and what they specifically needed help with. We had an evaluation sheet for students to complete after their appointment (and which we bribed them with candy to return) so we would know how we were doing. We also had a log for tutors to complete after each session so they could reflect on how it went. We had a binder to file all of this paperwork in because we wanted to keep accurate records of our experiences. We had an array of handouts offering writing tips for students coming in with questions. We had it all, it seemed.

Opening for Business

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send their students.

The lesson is that if you want students to come, teachers have to be the driving force. I've encouraged my 9th graders to visit the writing center for a variety of assignments this school year, both as a way to earn extra credit and as an assignment requirement. My co-workers have sent their students down to revise essays or to get help with developing an outline. The crucial part isn't getting teachers to believe the writing center is important, because I believe that most of them do, at least in theory. The essential thing is to show them that sending their students to the center isn't "one more thing to do" but it is one more thing they can do to make sure their students are confident, informed, and capable writers. The more you can reach out to your colleagues and work together on this, the better.

Amber echoes this sentiment, saying that, "Working across disciplines is KEY to making the center central to the school's academic culture." She advises involving teachers of other disciplines in the recruitment process, something I will certainly do in the future. As she says, it generates buy-in and increases confidence in sending their students to the center when they know who the tutors will be and how great they are.

**Support**

As is probably apparent by now, one of the most important resources to have as a new writing center director is support. My administration has been extremely encouraging, as has my department chair. I'm lucky to work in a school that cares so deeply about what we're trying to accomplish.

My fellow writing center directors have been wonderful. We have a listserv open to area writing center directors where we can pose questions and collect information about how other schools deal with some of the issues we contend with. There have also been several get-togethers since the school year began, chances for the directors to share ideas and get to know each other. When beginning, there are so many things to consider that it can feel overwhelming, so it's key to have a strong network of people to turn to for answers, ideas, and support that yes, things will come together.

When I asked some of my fellow directors for their best advice in starting a writing center, they had a lot to say. Here are some of the highlights:

> As hard as it can be for us as teachers to remove ourselves from the center of things, to draw back and let the students take charge and teach one another—when you DO allow that, and foster that, it is a remarkable and powerful thing to observe. I am filled with pride and awe—and know that this model is one that I need to integrate even more deeply and essentially into my own classroom.

~Bill McCabe, TC and writing center director at Robinson High School

My advice would be to include members of other departments on the advising staff. At Chantilly, we have 10 staff members from all core departments, ESOL and Special Education—this has encouraged student and faculty 'buy-in' and has also enhanced our literary focus on writing across the curriculum.

~Nikki Lehman, TC and writing center director at Chantilly High School

Student interest is a fun one. Involve your current tutors—they know what kids are into. Once a semester we have a big celebration event. The tutors all bring in cookies, brownies, cupcakes, etc. Then we make a little writing-related activity, and we pass them out to all the students in the cafeteria at lunch. If they fill out the activity, they can come to the writing center for a baked good. Free. It's a bake sale without the sale. What are we selling? Credibility and recognition among the student body. We want everyone to know where we are, how they can find us, and what we do. Along with the baked good, they get a bookmark with our hours, our services, and the kinds of papers we tutor. It's great PR.

~Amber Jensen, writing center director at Edison High School

**Reflection and Benefits**

As I look back over the course of the school year and what it took to start our center, the ups and downs with the frequency of its use, and what I've learned, I can honestly say that I'm so glad that we did it. The Wildcat Writing Center survived its inaugural year, and we were wiser and more confident in what we were doing than we were at the beginning. I already have many ideas for changes we'll implement next year, like being open during CATS time, working through the recruitment process with other
departments, and developing more creative marketing strategies, like Amber's not-for-profit bake sale idea.

Ultimately, I'd call this year a success, and that's because at the end of the day, the major goal of the writing center is to provide a service that is necessary for our kids, one that will empower both the tutors and the students seeking help. My tutors had this to say about their experience:

"I like knowing that I am helping somebody become better at something they are struggling with...My most positive tutoring experience was when I tutored a girl from AP English. I helped her and she also made me more confident with my job as a tutor."

"It helps me because I learn how to and how to not do some things based on the writing that I'm exposed to. I am able to see things from different points of view."

"A WC is important because it allows students to get help from peers who are just like them. Students are not afraid to come in for help because they know the tutor won't judge them."

In addition to the benefits for our tutors, what I'm most interested in is how it's benefitted the students coming in for help. Among the stand-out comments we've received are the following:

"I like how my tutor was supportive and didn't criticize bad parts of my writing, only gave me ways to make it better. There wasn't anything I didn't like. I think my experience was very useful."

"He was very kind and professional. He asked me questions to guide me to develop a storyline and he also taught me what a hook was. Overall awesome tutor."

"My experience at WWC was great! I got a lot of feedback from my tutor and it gave me confidence to share my essay and it made the story better. It was fun and a great learning experience. I would change nothing!"

"She asked me questions that I never thought about that made my paper better. I felt very open and comfortable talking to my tutor because she is around my age."

It's a wonderful feeling to know that students drive the learning here. The tutors gain confidence in their abilities as they help their peers gain confidence in theirs. While there is a lot of work that goes into establishing a writing center, the benefits certainly make it a worthwhile undertaking, one that I think every school would be fortunate to establish. Getting it off the ground is the hard part, but eventually when it's up and running, it's one of the most satisfying things you can experience as a teacher.

**Additional Resources**

Interested in learning more about writing center pedagogy, history, and practice? Check out the following resources:


Additionally, on the following pages you will find copies of the Post-Conference Evaluation Form, Tutoring Log, and Student Cover Sheet used by the Wildcat Writing Center. These forms were adapted from those used by Amber Jensen for Edison High School's Writing Center. Please feel free to adapt them as necessary for your own needs.
WILDCAT WRITING CENTER - POST-CONFERENCE EVALUATION

Please provide us with feedback about your experience in the writing center today by answering these questions. You may return your evaluation sheet to the box labeled “Wildcat Writing Center evaluations” in room 220 and pick up a small reward as a thank you from us!

Your name ______________________________ Grade Level _____

Tutor’s name ___________________________

1. I was prepared for the conference (draft, assignment sheet/rubric & cover sheet).
   __________ Yes __________ No

2. My tutor greeted me and explained what I could expect from the conference.
   __________ Yes __________ No

3. My tutor addressed the areas of concern that I had indicated on my cover sheet.
   __________ Yes __________ No

4. My tutor and I read the paper out loud together (at least portions of it).
   __________ Yes __________ No

5. My tutor asked me questions & encouraged me to talk about my paper.
   __________ Yes __________ No

6. My tutor and/or I wrote down comments and took notes during the conference.
   __________ Yes __________ No

7. I utilized the feedback of my tutor as I revised my assignment.
   __________ Yes __________ No

8. I was satisfied; the WWC conference met my expectations.
   __________ Yes __________ No

9. Evaluate your experience at the WWC. What did you like? What could make your experience better?

10. Please evaluate your tutor, giving feedback about his/her performance in the following areas: preparation, professionalism, knowledge about writing, listening skills, quality of feedback, communication skills with you.

11. Would you return to the WWC if it was not required or your teacher did not offer extra credit?
   • Yes, I found it to be very useful
   • No, I would only go if my teacher required it

12. I authorize my feedback to be given to my tutor: YES  NO

   • I want my feedback to be anonymous
   • It is okay if the tutor sees my name along with the comments I wrote

Thanks so much for taking the time to provide your feedback. We hope to see you in the Wildcat Writing Center again!
Wildcat Writing Center
Tutoring Log

Tutor Name: ____________________________________________

Date/Time: ____________________________________________

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<th>Student Name:</th>
<th>Course &amp; Teacher:</th>
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<th>Assignment Type:</th>
<th>Brief Summary of Conference &amp; Reflection:</th>
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WILDCAT WRITING CENTER
STUDENT COVER SHEET

Student Name_________________________ Course_________________________

Assignment Title______________________ Teacher_________________________

Date of Conference____________________ Paper Due Date_________________

Student Email Address__________________

Where in the writing process are you? Prewriting  Drafting  Revising  Re-writing

In your own words, what is the objective of the assignment (in other words, what is your teacher looking for you to do in your writing)? NOTE: PLEASE BRING ASSIGNMENT SHEET AND RUBRIC TO YOUR CONFERENCE!

So far, what are the strengths of your work?

What area(s) do you want the tutor to focus on during your conference? (Circle ONE or TWO).

Selecting a topic  Paragraphing  Grammar/Spelling
Research  Transitions  Voice/Style
Brainstorming  Introduction/Conclusion  Other________________
Formulating a thesis  Incorporating Quotes  Other________________
Supporting details/examples  MLA Citations

Is it your first time to the Writing Center? YES/NO

Why did you come to the Writing Center today? (Circle which statement applies)

• My teacher required it

• My teacher offered me extra credit for coming

• I have been here before and found it helpful

• I heard about it and wanted to give it a try

Tutor Signature:_______________________ Date______________________