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A Writer, an Editor, an Instructor, and an Alumna Walk into the Writing Center...

[Fall 2009 / Focus](#)

by *Jennifer Jefferson, Amy Cohn, Ellen Goldstein, Chris Wallis, and Lindsey Campbell, Endicott College*

Real-world professional experience in the writing center

What happens when professionals from diverse writing backgrounds walk into a small New England college writing center?[1] At [Endicott College](#), seven professional and ten peer tutors work with a traditional undergraduate population of approximately 2,000 students, as well as with a growing number of graduate students and non-traditional undergraduates. What benefits—besides providing advanced writing support for our graduate community—might the professional tutors' additional experience bring to the writing center?



The Endicott College Writing Center is located on the first floor of the Diane M. Halle Library (Beverly, MA). Photo by Catherine Wechsler.

As the writing center director, I believe our professional tutors provide valuable expert perspectives to student writers. They also help me mentor the peer tutors and push me to reevaluate our practices. They add staffing stability to the center (whose peer tutors never stay for more than three years). Finally, these trusted writing experts professionalize the writing center's status among administration, faculty, and students.

In the following paragraphs, Amy, Ellen, Chris, and Lindsey illustrate the rich variety of skills and perspectives professional writing tutors can contribute to a writing center.

AMY: From Writer to Professional Tutor

I joined the professional staff at the [Endicott Writing Center](#) more than five years ago. Although it was my first writing center position, I had enjoyed a long career in the children's book field -- publishing, reviewing for a variety of media, graduate-level teaching and writing. How did my expertise transfer to

this new setting? And how did my background affect my work with undergraduate students? Let's look at the first question first, as any good tutor would suggest!

After working for three decades with professional writers, as well as being one myself, I understand how hard writing is. For anyone. For everyone.

After working for three decades with professional writers, as well as being one myself, I understand how hard writing is. For anyone. For everyone. It is hard to come up with ideas. It is hard to craft cogent sentences. It is hard to wrestle just the right vocabulary word to the page from one's internal (or external!) thesaurus. And writing takes time -- lots of time. I share this with students. I encourage them with anecdotes and stories from the working lives of authors they may have grown up with. I tell them about my own writing challenges. And while I entertain and cajole, I remind them that feeling stuck or lost or fed-up or frustrated is something they will not only work through but come to embrace. It is, after all, part of the process.

Now for the second question. Because Endicott College values and promotes professional caliber internships, students relish advice from non-academic experts. It is natural to draw upon my particular piece of the professional world while tutoring, and what happens during our sessions reflects a professional writer's everyday challenges, such as: Which word? What phrase? What stays? What goes? Can I do better? But I'm not just a professional writer. I'm also a professional reader. I've had a lot of practice making sense of texts—not in order to grade them, but to learn and grow from reading, to have my curiosity first aroused, then satisfied.

My perspective as a professional reader-writer, I believe, enables the students to relax. They know I won't evaluate them in the way faculty might. I read, ask questions, talk things through, and never judge. Conferences have an air of collegiality and a feeling of partnership. We can talk as one writer to another, as a less experienced one with a more experienced one—as an apprentice, if you will, to a master tradeswoman.

ELLEN: From Editor to Professional Tutor

Like Amy, I tutor from outside the traditional student—faculty relationship, in my case drawing from my experience as an editor. Tutoring uses many of the same skills as editing. Both require an eye for detail, the ability to locate an argument—even when it is well-hidden—and a respect for the author and the writing process. The difference between the two jobs lies, in part, in how these skills are used. The editor is often more focused on getting to the finished product while the tutor lingers in the process in order to help students understand the steps necessary to improving their work. As a result, a tutor coming from an editorial background needs to remember to slow down and show their work, as in a math problem.

One of the unexpected benefits of my professional editing background is the ability to provide context. A professor can talk until she is blue in the face about a literature review and its role in a research paper, and students will still come into the writing center not quite sure why they have to do one. Often I can draw on my experience copyediting academic journals and can offer a concrete reason as to why certain conventions, such as literature reviews, exist. Students tend to respect my experience (and are sometimes surprised to learn

that these things occur in the “real” world). They can go back to class with my quick professional explanation, and are able to follow the professor when she talks about the bigger research issues involved. Once students see the connection between the academy, their own thesis or paper, and the professional world, they are much more likely to see the writing process as a whole. The professors and the professionals make a great tag team.

CHRIS: From Instructor to Professional Tutor

Whereas some students enjoy sessions with Amy and Ellen because of the perspectives they bring as “outsiders,” others choose to work with me because they consider me an “insider.”

Over my nine years of tutoring college-level writing, the phrase I heard most was “I just don’t know what Professor X wants.”

In *The Transition to College Writing*, Keith Hjortshoj notes how students often believe in a handbook that will tell them everything they need to know about effective writing (189). I might take this a step further and say that many students are on a quest to discover another more general handbook, *What Professors Want*, and that some students choose to work with me precisely because they think my identity as an instructor also means I can provide them a glimpse into their professor’s mind. Despite chuckling a bit at such a possibility, I also acknowledge that this belief underscores a fundamental disconnect between college students and faculty, one that becomes especially apparent during some of my tutoring sessions.

Over my nine years of tutoring college-level writing, the phrase I heard most was “I just don’t know what Professor X wants.” This grievance highlights a frustration that writers take with them into tutoring sessions, and their anxiety only increases when they realize their professors all seem to want different things. Certainly, I felt a similar frustration when I first started tutoring and had to negotiate unfamiliar disciplines—how to use APA citation in addition to MLA, how to organize a lab report, how not to fall asleep when reading an overly technical paper. And yet, though it’s true that my colleagues represent various disciplines and practice a number of writing styles, it’s also true that there is a consensus when it comes to student papers: they should contain clear openings and closings, strong arguments and reliable evidence, coherent organization, few distracting language problems, and a steady sense of audience.

What most college faculty desire from student writing, then, is *consistency*, something that students often misinterpret as *uniformity*. As both a tutor and an instructor, I am in a strong position to help students recognize this vital difference, and perhaps even shrink the ideological gap.

LINDSEY: From Peer Tutor Alumna to Professional Tutor

There is no better way to get the inside scoop than from a former insider. Not only was I once a student at Endicott College, but I also acted as a peer writing tutor for three of my four undergraduate years. After graduation, I went on to receive a master’s degree at Boston University and have since pursued a copywriting career in advertising. Now as a professional tutor, I am not only able to rely on my education and background as a writer, but I am also able to pull from my time as a student to become a better tutor, listener, supporter, and at times, psychologist (sometimes it can take more than a little coaxing to convince a student to hit “delete” and start all over again).

From my experiences as both a tutee and peer tutor, I've found that I am able to connect with the students in a unique way. At the beginning of each writing session, I introduce myself as a former student at Endicott. This statement gives me instant credibility with my tutee—and it has nothing to do with my writing skills. For instance, I once had a senior business major that scheduled an appointment with me to go over a chapter of his thesis project. After our first session, I could tell he was frustrated with all of the changes we made to his work. To ease his disappointment, I explained to him that I had also written a thesis at Endicott, and I knew exactly how he felt. It is not just the thesis that is difficult to handle, but also the additional internships, classes, and part-time jobs that most students juggle. He seemed relieved and grateful for my empathy, and left the session a little lighter than when he had arrived.

Initially, this student sought out the writing center only under his professor's advisement. But eventually, he made a standing weekly appointment and even made a point to share his final product with me. What helped my tutee more than my writing expertise was the benefit of my experience as a former student. He knew that I, too, sat on the other side of the table; wrote papers; wrote and re-wrote a thesis; and horror of horrors, had to hit delete and start all over again. But in the end, I survived. And by knowing I had, he knew that he could, too. Sometimes all it takes is a lot of understanding mixed with a little advisement and a dash of confidence to make an impossible writing situation seem possible for a student. Speaking as an insider, I can definitely relate.

JENNIFER: Final Reflections

The common thread throughout these narratives has been what gives the individual tutors credibility with student writers. As a director, I also see what the tutors accomplish from a campus public relations perspective. Faculty know these tutors bring expertise to their interactions with students, they see the improvements in student writing, and they encourage students to visit us. Many of those students who initially visit to work with a professional tutor then experience working with peer tutors as well. These students take positive reports back to their faculty, and faculty continue to refer and to reinforce this affirming cycle. The presence of professional tutors therefore seems to enhance the campus perception of their peer tutor colleagues. Each professional tutor brings to the center a wider range of writing experiences than could peer, graduate student, or faculty tutors alone. These tutors professionalize the entire center, which ultimately benefits students, faculty, and the College. That, for us, is what happens when a writer, an editor, an instructor, and an alumna walk into the writing center.

Notes

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Works Cited

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Jennifer Jefferson directs the writing center and teaches writing courses at **Endicott College**. She holds an MA in composition and rhetoric from **Northeastern University** and a BA in English (*Phi Beta Kappa*) from **Hamilton College**. She chairs Endicott's Writing Advisory Task Force and has served on the steering committee for the **Northeast Writing Centers Association**. Jennifer also spent several years in the publishing industry; she continues to edit books and professional articles on a freelance basis. Her recent publications include two **Writing Lab Newsletter** articles: "**Knowing the Faculty (Too?) Well: An Advantage or Disadvantage for Small College Writing Centers?**" (March 2009) and "**Instructors Tutoring Their Own Students in the Writing Center: A Conflict of Interest?**" (December 2007).

Amy Cohn: After a distinguished career in children's book publishing and reviewing, which included serving as marketing director of **The Horn Book, Inc.** and editor-in-chief of three different children's imprints at William Morrow and Co., writing two books, teaching graduate-level courses at **Simmons** and **Lesley** colleges, and appearing regularly on various National Public Radio programs and the CBS Morning News, Amy Cohn joined the staff of the writing center at **Endicott College**. There, she works daily with great pleasure helping students improve and mature as writers of all sorts of texts. Amy is a graduate (*Phi Beta Kappa*) of **SUNY Binghamton** (now Binghamton University) and holds an MA in children's literature from Simmons College.

Ellen Goldstein is a freelance editor by day and a professional writing tutor at **Endicott College** by night. She has a BA in English from **Carleton College** and an MFA from **Emerson College**. Ellen is a poetry reader for ***Junctures: A Journal of Thematic Dialogue***. She has published poetry in *Mid-American Review*, *Valaparaíso Poetry Review*, *StorySouth*, *Able Muse*, and *you are here: the journal of creative geography*, as well as in the anthology *Letters to the World*, published by Red Hen Press.

Chris Wallis began his tutoring career as an undergraduate at **Saint Michael's College** in Vermont, where he earned a BA in French and English (*Phi Beta Kappa*). While pursuing his MA in English literature at **Boston College**, he continued to bolster his tutoring skills at the school's **Connors Family Learning Center**. Currently, in addition to tutoring in the Endicott College Writing Center, he teaches composition and literature courses at both **Endicott College** and **Wheelock College**. His research focuses on gender and sexuality in early modern English literature and culture, and he has written essays exploring sodomitical discourse and representations of the female body in Renaissance drama and anatomical tracts.

Lindsey Campbell is a professional tutor at the **Endicott College Writing Center** and a copywriter experienced in cross media: print, television, radio, outdoor, online, and guerilla copy for advertising. She has won "Best Overall Package" for the development of a web-based interactive children's game and published an international feature article in *Hot English Magazine*. She holds an MS in advertising from **Boston University** and a BS in communication from **Endicott College**. She worked as a peer writing tutor and a communication tutor during her undergraduate years. Lindsey is currently pursuing a copywriting career in the advertising world.

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