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Fall 2015

# Write Free or Die: Vol. 02, No. 01

UNH Writing Program

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# WRITE FREE OR DIE

The Newsletter of the UNH Writing Program

Volume 2, Issue 1

Fall 2015

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*"A robot may not harm a human being."*

— Isaac Asimov's First Law of Robotics (modified version)

*Ed Mueller*

*Director, University Writing Program*

Given that the Writing Program includes the Connors Writing Center, and that my office is in the same suite, I am familiar with the unvarnished student writing habits and attitudes on display there. This, combined with my work with faculty, helps to give me a rounded view of writing at UNH. Sometimes, it even allows me to connect a few dots.

Most trends in the writing center fall into broadly familiar patterns. Recently, however, Molly Tetreault, Connors Writing Center Director, related a story about something new. Two students, independent of one another, had come to

the writing center in connection with the same lower-division class, with papers that exhibited the same features. Their paragraphs, as units of meaning, were unintelligible, consisting of strings of sentences with no coherence and statements with no development. This, by itself, is not necessarily unusual. Students often come to the Connors Writing Center to work on the "flow" (coherence) of their writing, and such discussions often lead to related issues like paragraph development and overall organization.

However, in these two cases, when the writing center peer-tutors steered the

*continued on page 2*

## Future Tense:

### *Upcoming Writing Across the Curriculum Events*

- **January 7: Collaborative Writing Assignment Workshop (Offered through CETL: Please Watch for Their Announcement in Order to RSVP)** The UNH Writing Program will present on best practices, and a cross-disciplinary faculty panel will share their experiences with collaborative writing in their classes.
- **March 30: Guest Speaker Dr. Barbara Walvoord: "How to make grading efficient and useful for learning" (Time and Location TBA)** This year, the UNH Writing Program is pleased to welcome Dr. Barbara Walvoord, Professor Emerita, University of Notre Dame, to give an interactive talk on feedback and grading student papers. Dr. Walvoord is a sought after speaker on assessment and student writing, and a former director of award winning faculty development programs at Central College in Iowa, Loyola College in Maryland, the University of Cincinnati, and the University of Notre Dame. She is also the author of *Helping Students Write Well*, and *Thinking and Writing in College: A Naturalistic Study of Students in Four Disciplines*.
- **Spring 2016: Student Exit Interviews (Time and Location TBA):** The Writing Committee will once again be conducting exit interviews with a panel of graduating seniors on their writing histories at UNH. Faculty are invited to join in this event. Watch for an announcement in the next newsletter.
- **June 6-8 (tentative): Second Annual Writing Intensive Faculty Retreat:** The UNH Writing Program is looking forward to reprising the WI Faculty retreat at the Omni Mount Washington Hotel in early June 2016, followed by a 1/2 day session at UNH in August. Among the goals will be to give faculty a more complete awareness of the principles underlying WI courses, to equip them with practices to enhance working with student writing in their courses, and to promote exchange and forge connections among WI faculty. Details are currently being confirmed. Watch for an announcement with application instructions early in the Spring Semester.

## WAC(ky) People

### UNH Writing Program

Ed Mueller, Director  
Molly Tetreault, Assistant Director  
Brad Dittrich, Associate Director  
Sarah Franco, Associate Director  
Wendy VanDellon, Associate Director

### Writing Committee

College Representatives:	Term End
PCBE - Michael Kukenberger (Management)	2018
COLSA - Iago Hale (Biological Sciences)	2016
CEPS - John Gibson (Math and Statistics)	2018
COLA-1 - Nicoletta Gullace (History)	2016
COLA-2 - Petar Ramadanovic (English)	2017
CHHS - Marc Hiller (Health Management and Policy)	2016*
UNHM - Gail Fensom (English, Director of First Year Writing Program)	2017

\* Faculty Chair

### Permanent Representatives:

*Writing Program Director*  
Ed Mueller  
*Director of Composition*  
Christina Ortmeier-Hooper  
*Center for Teaching Excellence*  
Catherine Overson  
*Academic Standards*  
Judy Spiller  
*Discovery Committee*  
Kathrine Aydelott

### Ex officio (non voting):

Patti Stimson  
(Registrar), Committee Secretary

*"A Robot" continued from page 1*

conversations in these directions, they were brought up short. Both students said that their papers were going to be "read" by a computer. Therefore, all that mattered was that they be generously populated with key terms from the source material. In short, both papers had been deliberately written to make sense to a search engine, not a person. One student described this method as "vocabulary dropping"—taking key terms from the readings and dropping them into sentences. Beyond that, all that they wanted to do was to make sure that the sentences passed grammatical muster, regardless of meaning.

We don't know if these students came up with this process on their own or if they learned it from past practice. If the latter is the case, this may represent the leading edge of a population of students who have been exposed to automated essay scoring (AES) in K-12 and who are now bringing this new set of assumptions and habits to their collegiate writing. It's something to be aware of.

This also brings the issue of AES home to UNH. Much of the national debate over AES often seems to center on the ability of so-called robo-graders to "read" and give meaningful feedback to student writers,\* usually discussed in terms of error. In fact, this focus on robo-graders as spelling and grammar checkers distracts from other issues.

One major shortcoming of AES is the absence of an authentic audience, a critical component of the rhetorical situation for any piece of writing. As Ann Herrington and Charles Moran put it in a 2012 essay, "Writing to a Machine is Not Writing At All."\*\* Believing that they were writing for a

computer, these students composed accordingly. Rather amazingly, they replicated the action of Dr. Les Perelman's BABEL Generator, only without the software. [editor's note: for more BABEL, please see the piece on Dr. Les Perelman later in this newsletter]

Although we must acknowledge that these students were engaged with course material, it would be safe to say that what they were doing probably wasn't in mind when the instructor created the assignment, and it certainly wouldn't conform to anything envisioned in the goals for student writing and learning at UNH.

Now, it could be that the students misunderstood the assignment, and that their instructor did read their papers, perhaps in conjunction with a pass through Turn-it-In or some other system. If so, it must have been an epiphany (for all parties). Regardless, this anecdote serves as a cautionary tale about the unintended consequences of AES use. It also reinforces the rationale for addressing writing expectations in-context with assignments. Such guidance helps to key students to transfer more productive writing habits to the task at hand, not only in the transition from K-12 to college writing but also among courses in the UNH curriculum.

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\* It is the position of the National Council of Teachers of English and the Writing Program Administrators that AES does not fulfill vendors' claims.

\*\* For full information on this piece and other AES references, please feel free to contact the Writing Program.

For more information, please contact [edward.mueller@unh.edu](mailto:edward.mueller@unh.edu). ▲

*"It is perfectly okay to write garbage—as long as you edit brilliantly"*

—C.J. Cherryh

# The Dangling Modifier: *Managing Collaborative Writing*

Wendy VanDellon

Associate Director, University Writing Program

In 2014 when the University Writing Program completed the update to the Writing-Intensive Syllabi Review, we found a significant growth in collaborative writing in the curriculum. Of the 463 WI syllabi collected, 89 suggested group writing was occurring, and 98 separate collaborative events could be identified. These projects can be challenging for both faculty and students to manage. Part of the challenge comes from selling the project to students, particularly those who have had negative experiences with group projects in the past. Here are some practical tips to help students collaborate more productively on group writing assignments.

Group work can often suffer because students have seen the negative effects of working with their peers. This can include students who have been with others who assumed that group work would be a free ride, a time to socialize, or where conflict was present but unresolved. Teaching conflict resolution skills as part of the set up to group work can help to both prevent and resolve disagreements. One tip would be to role-play responses to hypothetical situations and allow students to work through solutions. In order to reassure students that their work will be valued, be sure to set clear expectations at the beginning of the project. You might have teams create ground rules, or have students

sign a contract that shows how each member will contribute. An instructor can also manage student concerns by ensuring that students are assessed both on their group work as well as their individual work within the group. This can be done with periodic progress reports, self-evaluations, and peer evaluations. By examining these reports, an instructor can get a pretty good feel for how the group is doing, how each individual is faring, and how each member is contributing (or not contributing). With these evaluations, an instructor can also determine whether a group is functioning well or if an intervention is needed to get a group back on track.

To try and create a workable environment early, consider how the project is organized by answering some important questions: How many students will be in each group? Is there a high rate of interdependence with this project? Will class time be devoted to meetings? How will students divide up the work/roles? The more people in a group the more complex the challenges, meaning smaller groups may work better, especially if there is a high amount of interdependence. Designating some class time for group meetings can both facilitate the work and make the process more visible. Encouraging or assigning defined roles (leader, communication manager, etc.) to particular students may also help.

Our January 7 workshop will be on this subject. If you are interested in hearing more and working with colleagues, see "Future Tense" and watch for the CETL invitation.

For more on managing collaborative writing or to see grading rubrics, please contact Wendy: [wja26@wildcats.unh.edu](mailto:wja26@wildcats.unh.edu). ▲

2016  
**WI**hite Mountain  
**Faculty Retreat**

Open to Tenure Track,  
Lecturers, and Clinical  
Faculty Teaching WI  
Courses

Watch for Application  
Information in February

Tentative Dates: June 6-8, 2016  
Omni Mount Washington Hotel

# Ask Sarah:

## Your writing concerns addressed by our very own Sarah B. Franco

Dear Sarah:

*I find that I am constantly explaining proper citation to my students, and I'm still getting incorrect formatting. How can I help my students to use the correct citation format?*

—Sincerely, Serious about Citation

Dear Serious:

You are not alone. There are many causes for confusion where citation is considered. Although students are required to use citation across the disciplines, transferring knowledge remains an ongoing concern. Contextualizing the citation format for a specific class addresses this issue directly and allows students to talk about their struggles with citation. Here are some general issues that might arise followed by ideas to help you support your students as they learn and practice proper citation.

### Students don't understand the purpose of varying citation styles.

Since there are so many different citation styles (i.e. MLA, APA, ASA, Chicago, Chicago-Turabian), students may be exposed to many and find distinctions arbitrary. This can make it challenging for students to keep citations straight.

**What you can do:** Explain that citation styles change depending on what is most valued in particular disciplines. For example, APA, commonly used in the social sciences, calls for a source's date of publication in the in-text citations because up-to-date research is highly valued. Disciplines in the humanities, however, place more value on authors' ideas and the way in which those ideas are shared; instead of a date in an in-text citation, page numbers are included so interested readers can locate direct passages.

Understanding the purpose behind varying citation styles will help students remember which formats are appropriate for discipline specific assignments.

### Students don't know how to cite or they "forget" correct citation format.

Who *can* keep all those details straight? Especially when citation styles are revised periodically.

**What you can do:** Show students where to find up to date citation style guides and make them aware that not all resources are foolproof.

Resources:

1. RefWorks, which links sources from the databases to the citation tool, is available through Dimond Library's website.
2. Purdue's Online Writing Lab (OWL) ([www.owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/](http://www.owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/)) is an excellent online resource for APA and MLA citation styles.

3. The Connors Writing Center offers pdf handouts on several different citation styles that include both explanation and examples of proper citation ([www.unh.edu/writing/cwc/handouts/](http://www.unh.edu/writing/cwc/handouts/)).

Including links to any one of these resources on your syllabus or directly on an assignment description is a good way to encourage students to use these resources.

*A cautionary tale:* Resources can also be problematic, and may be a common cause for the citation errors seen in student papers. RefWorks and other popular websites such as [easybib.com](http://easybib.com) and [citationmachine.net](http://citationmachine.net) promise writers a correct citation *when provided with the appropriate information*. While these tools do produce citations, the responsibility of entering information correctly lies with the writer.

### Provide opportunities for practice.

Since citation styles are revised periodically and professors vary in their expectations for citation in student work, the best way to help students cite correctly is by teaching them how to make good use of their resources, and then providing opportunities for them to practice. Here are some practical ways to teach citation:

1. Design a mini lesson where you walk students through the steps of correctly using a resource (either a physical or online handbook, or a handout from the Connors Writing Center's website). Then provide a variety of sources (books, articles from the library database, websites, etc.) and ask students to write correct citations. You can have students check each other's work, or collect the exercise to see where students are still struggling.
  2. As an in class exercise, provide several scrambled citations, and have students put them in the correct order. You can talk through errors as a group.
  3. Provide a works cited page generated by a website such as [easybib.com](http://easybib.com), and have students use a resource to identify and correct the errors they notice. Afterwards, let them know where the works cited page was generated to emphasize that students must still check their citations.
  4. Make correct citation a part of the writing process. Have students submit a works cited page for review along with their first draft. Before collecting the papers, allow students time to go over their works cited pages using a resource. Or have students swap their works cited page, and have peers check over citations for errors.
  5. Allow students to revise their in-text citations and Works Cited page for the first graded assignment. This draws attention to the importance of correct citation and sets the standard for subsequent assignments.
- Finally, keep in mind that focusing on the importance of correct citation style over the course of the semester and as part of the writing process will yield more improvement than trying to address errors after the final draft is submitted and graded.

For more information on teaching citation styles, please contact Sarah: [sbl39@wildcats.unh.edu](mailto:sbl39@wildcats.unh.edu). ▲

# The Man Who Killed the SAT Essay Visits UNH

Wendy VanDellon

Associate Director, University Writing Program

On April 9, 2015, Les Perelman, former Director of Writing Across the Curriculum at MIT, came to UNH to present his most recent findings about automated essay scoring in a talk titled "Artificial Unintelligence: Why and How Automated Essay Scoring Doesn't Work (most of the time)." Perelman has gained national recognition in both the scholarly and popular presses for his research-based critiques of automated essay scoring and standardized testing. A March 2014 *Boston Globe* piece named him, "The man who killed the SAT essay."

The presentation examined automated essay scoring as well as the artificial nature of timed writing tests. "A boss never sends someone an email asking 'Is failure necessary for success? Get back to me in twenty five minutes,'" Perelman amusingly observed. Another high point came when Dr. Perelman showed a clip from the *Colbert Report* that cited his research showing a 92 percent correlation between the number of words in SAT essays and their machine-generated scores: the higher the word count, the higher the score.

The latest development in Perelman's critique is the Basic Automated B.S. Essay Language Generator, or BABEL Generator. Created in conjunction with students from MIT and Harvard University, it is software that generates a nonsense essay based on several key words. These receive high marks when submitted to automated essay scoring systems.

To illustrate, he showed the results of a BABEL Generator essay that was submitted to a practice GRE essay test offered via ETS. In response to a prompt that asked for the writer to agree or disagree with the claim, "The best way for a society to prepare its young people for leadership in government, industry, or other fields is by instilling in them a sense of cooperation, not competition," the BABEL Generator produced an essay composed of passages like:



Les Perelman discusses automated essay scoring, offering lessons that faculty and administrators can take away concerning the limitations of machine scoring systems.

"Competition for an inquiry has not, and presumably never will be antipodal, puissant, and equitable. Success is the most fundamental adjuration of humankind; many with the search for semiotics but a few for pondering a quantity of cooperation lies in the area of philosophy together with the field of semantics. Although buccaneer might propagate amygdales, cooperation is both boastful and insouciant." The ETS scoring system gave the response a 6, the highest rating, along with the following feedback: "The response presents a cogent, well articulated examination of the argument and conveys meaning skillfully."

Perelman followed with several conclusions:

- The software does not do what it tells students and

teachers that it is doing.

- The metrics (proxies) are irrelevant, at best, and probably are antithetical to good writing or communication.
- Students can probably be trained to memorize language and strategies to obtain high scores (construct-irrelevant strategies). [editor's note: see "A Robot..." in this newsletter for an illustration of this]

Another important point made was the damage that erroneous feedback from automated essay scoring can inflict on weak writers and second language writers in particular, not only in terms of style, but also error.

Perelman pointed out (as have others) that one of the major issues with AES has been that vendors who produce and market these systems have not been transparent. Perelman recommends more regulation as well as access to independent researchers to validate claims.

To conclude his discussion, Perelman invited the audience to collectively work through a prompt using the BABEL Generator (the resultant score was 5 out of 6).

For more information on Les Perelman and automated essay scoring, please email Wendy at [wja26@wildcats.unh.edu](mailto:wja26@wildcats.unh.edu). ▲

*"Reading maketh a full man, conference a ready man, and writing an exact man."*

- Francis Bacon

# 2015 WI Faculty Retreat

Ed Mueller,  
Director, University Writing Program

In early June, nine faculty members participated in the inaugural WI Faculty Retreat, the centerpiece of which was a three-day offsite at the Omni Mount Washington Hotel. The venue was certainly an inspiration (and the soup a revelation). Participants engaged in an immersive three-day program that progressed from reading and discussing foundational concepts in writing pedagogy to applied workshopping on course and assignment design.

Equipped with references and resources, faculty then departed to continue to work on their courses over the summer. The group then reconvened in August at UNH to confer and share progress. We will be meeting again at the end of this semester for another update and to hear from those who taught their courses in the fall.

We certainly intend to maintain this network of connected faculty in future opportunities to gather and share ideas.

If you'd like to join this expanding community of practice, feel free to get in touch. Watch for an announcement in February about applying for the 2016 WI Faculty Retreat, which will once again be held at the Omni Mount Washington Hotel (soup included).

For more information, contact [edward.mueller@unh.edu](mailto:edward.mueller@unh.edu). ▲

Photo courtesy of Geoffrey Hirsch



Facilitators and Graduates of the first WI Faculty Retreat at the Mt. Washington Hotel. Left to Right: Ed Mueller, Kevin McLaughlin, Nena Stracuzzi, Michael Jonas, Sarah Hirsch, Christina Ortmeier-Hooper, Joan Glutting, Katherine Lockwood, Bill Stine, Nathan Webster, Stephanie Harzewski, Leah Williams

*“The difference between the right word and almost the right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug.”*

- Mark Twain

## WAC(ky) Resources Tools for Faculty

- **Pdf Handouts:** The Writing Program website has a range of pdf handouts that faculty may find useful to assist with managing writing in their classes: <http://www.unh.edu/writing/cwc/handouts/>
- **Writing Center Videos:** The Connors Writing Center has informational videos as well as a video on peer review on its website: <http://www.unh.edu/writing/cwc/videos/>
- **WI Course Proposals:** Fall 2016 Semester proposals are due by March 31. Spring 2017 Semester proposals are due by October 15, 2016. See: <http://www.unh.edu/writing/uwr/faculty/WIproposal/>
- **Other:** Feel free to contact the Director of the Writing Program for consultation on managing writing in a course, department, or program: [edward.mueller@unh.edu](mailto:edward.mueller@unh.edu)

# Past Perfect

## Director's Notes

Ed Mueller

Director, University Writing Program

Once again, the Writing Program will be offering several structured ways for faculty to become involved with writing across the curriculum. There will be a January workshop on collaborative writing, a guest speaker event in late March (Dr. Barbara Walvoord on effective, efficient grading), another round of student exit interviews at the end of the spring semester, and a second WI Faculty Retreat in June. There will be other ways as well. In connection with a self-study and external program review, we'll be sending out some short surveys to WI faculty and department chairs, probably shortly before or after the Thanksgiving break. Please be on the watch for those. Your Writing Committee representatives are also available for you to engage with.

In connection with the aforementioned self-study, we

did an analysis of UNH WI courses: we found that there are a total of 813 approved WI courses in the system, with upper division courses (600-700) outnumbering lower division courses by more than 2 to 1. Going beyond the totals, we searched the Time and Room schedule to see how many WI sections were actually being taught per semester: there were 662 in spring '15 and 672 in fall '15 (so quite a few). We found that, consistent with the totals, the number of upper division WI course sections being taught per semester doubled the number of lower division WI course sections. We also found that within the upper division courses, the number of 700-level WI course sections being taught significantly outnumbered the 600-level: 283 to 149 in spring '15 and 230 to 158 in fall '15

Although this analysis didn't take into account other factors, such as the number of seats in a section, the seemingly top heavy distribution that emerged suggests that some examination of the curricular attention given to writing in lower division courses could prove useful, particularly in programs where there are concerns about student preparation for senior-level writing. ▲

## The Grammar Box:

### Passive Voice

Sarah B. Franco

Associate Director, University Writing Program

Passive voice is a style choice that emphasizes the *object* and not the *subject* of a sentence. Consider the following:

*Students use passive voice effectively.*

In the above active voice example, "students" is the subject or agent of the sentence and is doing the action ("use"). "Passive voice" is the object to which the action is happening. Now consider the passive voice version below:

*Passive voice is used effectively by students.*

In the above, "passive voice" is the object that is being acted upon ("used") by an agent ("students"). Sometimes, a passive structure will omit the agent, as below:

*Passive voice is used effectively.* (the most famous example of a passive omission: *Mistakes were made.*)

While certain writing genres value active over passive voice because the agent is considered the most important (in a personal essay, for example), passive voice is appropriate when emphasizing a process or object over the agent. Passive voice is especially useful in scientific, technical, and/or mechanical writing, where the emphasis is on process, as in the below example from a student's draft for an assignment in Earth Science:

*The sample temperatures are recorded as heat is transferred through the wire.*

Although not technically an error, ineffective or inappropriate passive structures can lead to wordiness, clarity issues, and other problems, regardless of genre. The Connors Writing Center pdf handouts, "Active and Passive Voice" and "Cutting Clutter" are available as resources to help faculty address passive voice with students.

If you have ideas for future topics for The Grammar Box please contact Sarah: [sbl39@wildcats.unh.edu](mailto:sbl39@wildcats.unh.edu). ▲