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The Writing Center

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The Writing Center: Fifteen Years of Transforming Writers at the University of Montana

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The Writing Center

**Fifteen Years of Transforming Writers at
The University of Montana**



UNIVERSITY OF
MONTANA

*The Writing Center:
Fifteen Years of Transforming Writers at
the University of Montana*



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Photo credit:
Shuai Yuan
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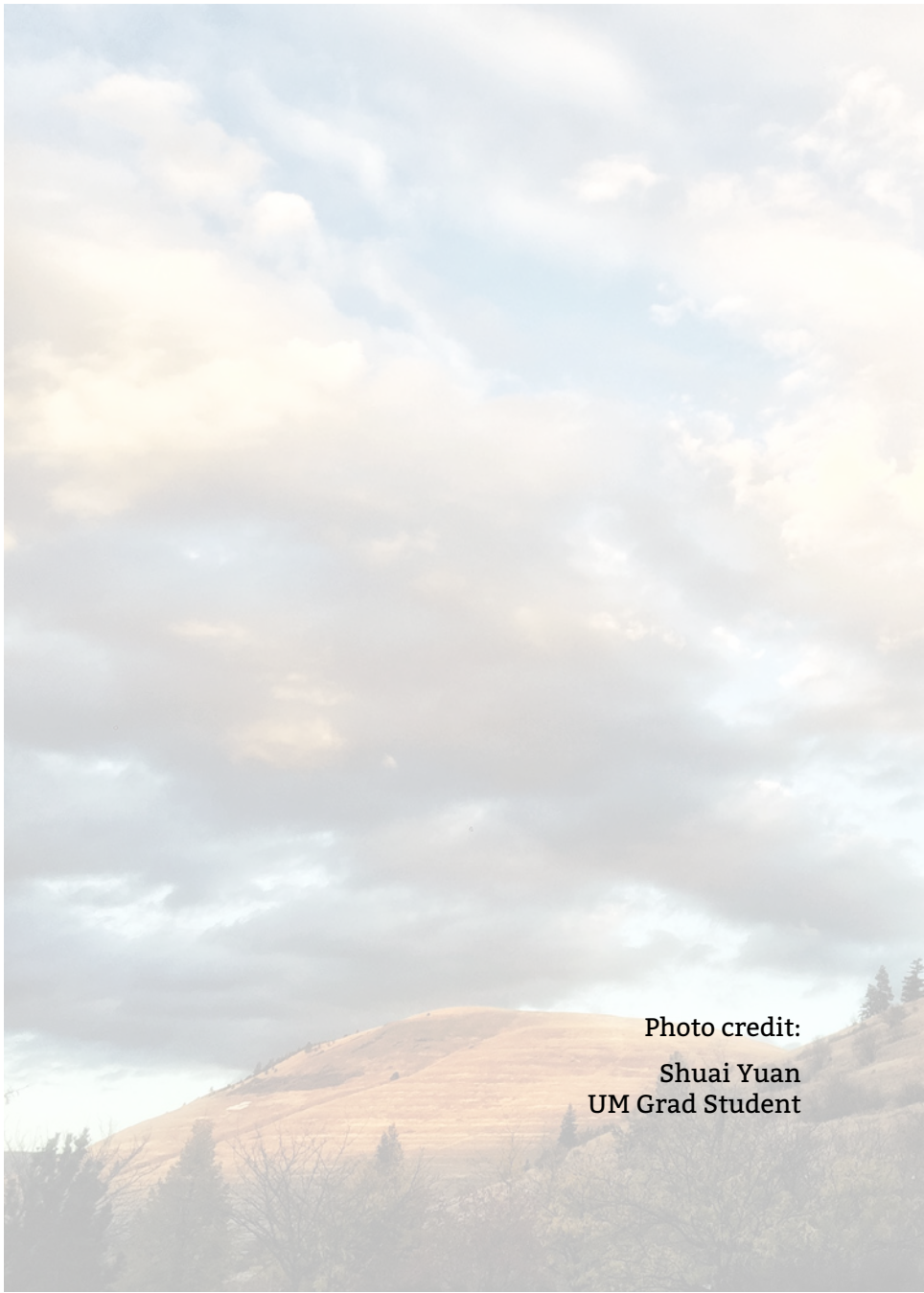


Photo credit:
Shuai Yuan
UM Grad Student

Mission

As a hub for campus conversations about writing, the University of Montana's Writing Center administers programs to help undergraduate and graduate students in all disciplines become more versatile and effective writers, readers, and thinkers. In one-to-one and small-group tutoring sessions and in writing workshops, tutors help students to recognize their strengths and weaknesses as communicators and to practice strategies appropriate to various writing contexts. In addition, the Writing Center collaborates with faculty to provide instruction that positively impacts student performance.



Covering Your Eyes

Melissa Unger
UM Graduate

From the Director

We're thrilled to be celebrating fifteen years of high-impact programming at the University of Montana's Writing Center.

This milestone invites a retrospective look at the impact and scope of our services. The many evolutions of the UM Writing Center—from a small “lab” for struggling writers in 2002 to a robust communication center for undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, and staff in 2017—have consistently embodied education at its best: communities of practice at the intersection of students, faculty, staff, and tutors.

Our continued reflection and expansive thinking about how to better promote effective communication has informed the Writing Center's evolutions over the past fifteen years. We maintain that excellence in education requires an abiding commitment to strengthening students' ability to read, research, think, and communicate, and to enhancing faculty members' ability to support that growth. We couple this commitment to excellence with an entrepreneurial spirit that keeps us on a path of improved educational experiences for UM students.

During the past fifteen years, the Writing Center has consistently increased student and faculty access to individual and small-group instruction, made public and accessible general and discipline-specific communication strategies, and influenced the curriculum in support of student success.

Our impact reaches well beyond helping a typical undergraduate student improve a typical term paper. We help writers from across the UM community with an astonishing variety of communication tasks. And we don't just help writers produce better products; we transform writers. As one student quipped about her use of the UM Writing Center:

“Total game changer.”

But I'm not the most compelling advocate of the Writing Center. UM students, faculty, and tutors tell our story best in the pages that follow.

Here's to the next fifteen years.

Kelly Webster, Director, University of Montana Writing Center

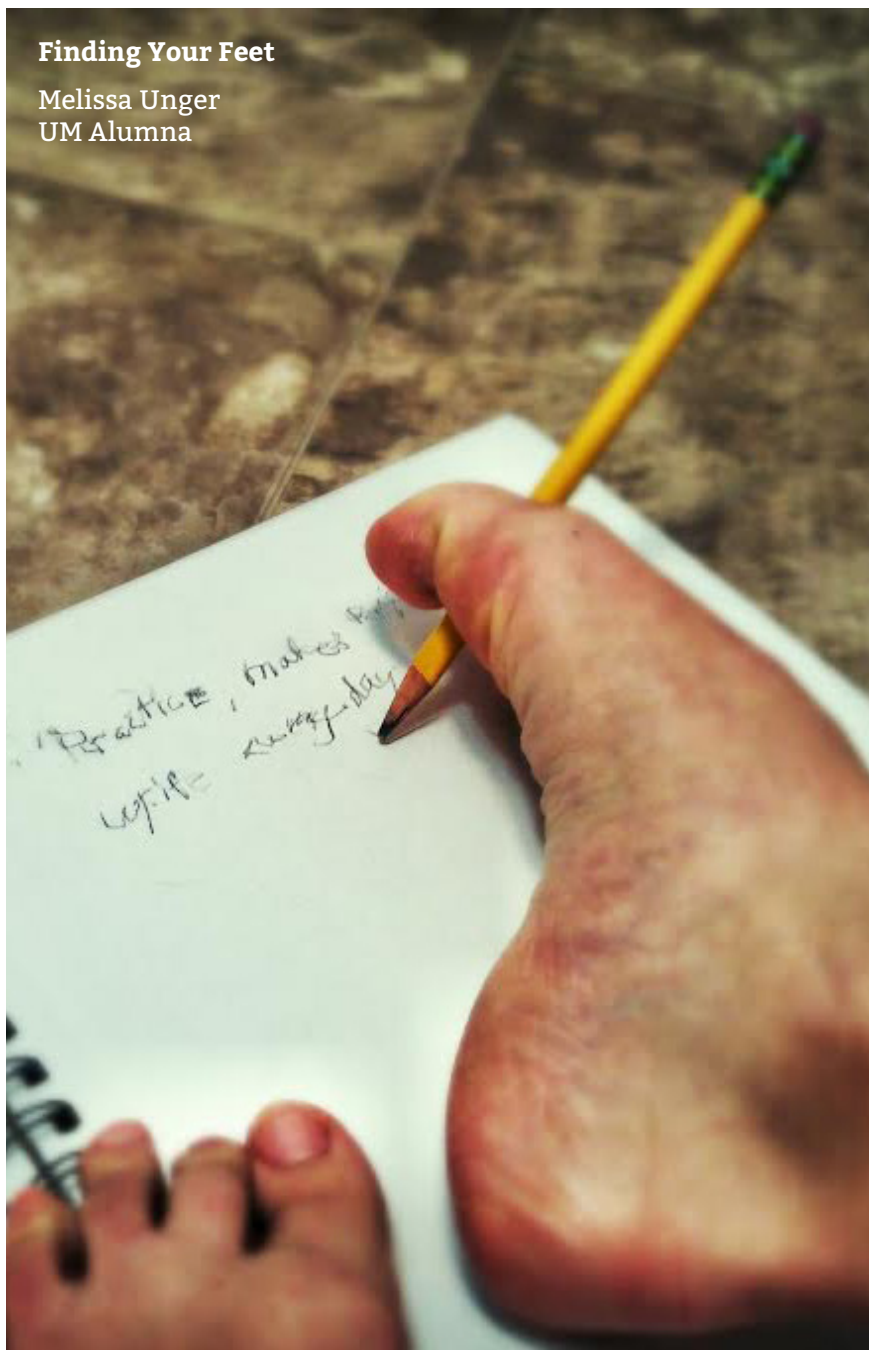
Overview of Themes

In celebration of the Writing Center's fifteenth anniversary, this publication showcases the scope and impact of our services. This publication features stories of current and former undergraduate students, graduate students, current and former tutors, and faculty collaborators.

These stories demonstrate not only what the Writing Center has accomplished over the years but also *why this work matters* for individuals in our UM community. From one-to-one tutoring, to Sidecars, to collaborative teaching efforts, to large-scale assessment efforts, the Writing Center has a profound effect on the University of Montana.

Finding Your Feet

Melissa Unger
UM Alumna



Impact

Writerly Talk

The purpose of a writing center should be, as retired Associate Provost Arlene Walker-Andrews says, “to get people to talk about writing.”

The University of Montana’s Writing Center fulfills that purpose. A poster in the Writing Center reads: “We’re not here because students can’t write; we’re here because they do.” Indeed. All writers need readers. All communicators need feedback.

Former tutor Alicia Bones explains that she began tutoring with “the perception that the Writing Center existed for remedial students and writers.” After she began working at the Writing Center, however, that myth dissolved. For two years, she worked with a diverse community of writers—honors students, international students, graduate students, doctoral candidates, faculty—on a variety of writing tasks. All discover the Writing Center to be an academic community of writers who gently but persistently push one another to stretch further, to think harder, and to write more clearly.

“Working with tutors at the Writing Center is an essential first step in working on any written paper at any point. I really appreciate brainstorming with the tutors and having a tutor critique my draft so that I become more aware of what needs to be done to achieve the professor’s and my desired result.”
—Forestry Undergraduate Student

A recent graduate student who participated in a week-long Writing Center workshop describes the value of talking about writing this way: “I took refuge in knowing I wasn’t alone in my fear and frustration...Talking about my ideas and writing has not only had a big impact on my understanding of the mechanical and grammatical aspects of writing but also has demystified writing as a process of strategic choices.”

School of Social Work faculty member Charlie Wellenstein also recognizes the value of talking about writing. He notes, “Students are often intimidated to come to an instructor and say, ‘Help me with my writing.’ But the Writing Center tutors are always here. They are open, they are kind, and they are super helpful. The Writing Center has really opened doors for our students.”

A pad of paper at the front desk in the Writing Center reads: “The Writing Center: A Place for Writers to Talk about Writing.” Writers are at their best when discussing their work with others.

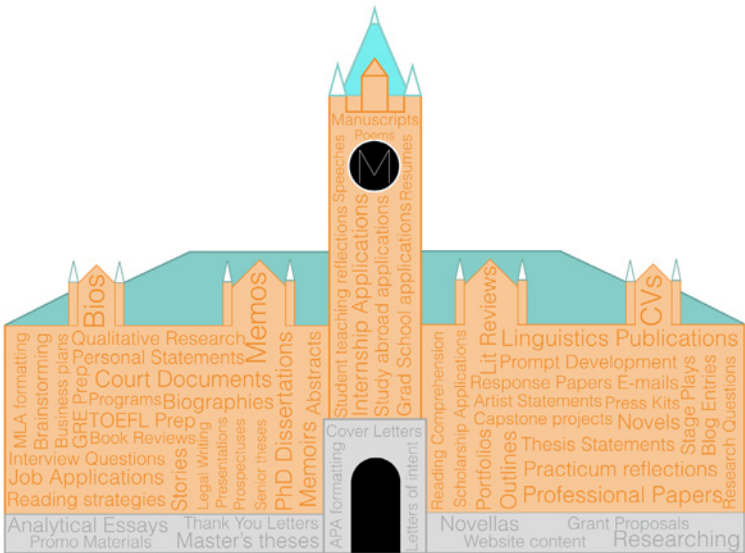
Empowered Writers

Many factors—the task, the prompt, the guidelines, the expectations, the stakes—influence a writer. Graduate student Mina May used the Writing Center to revise her application materials for the communicative sciences and disorders master’s program. “Our program is really competitive,” Mina stresses, so she entrusted the Writing Center with her application essay.

“Each tutoring session has empowered me. Whether I’ve been stuck, exploring ideas, or feeling hopeless, I’ve gotten just what I needed. Writing is not yet fun, but not as daunting, thanks to the Writing Center.”

—Anthropology Graduate Student

During her first session, a tutor asked her: “What does your program actually want to hear? What’s going to make them choose you?” This question “completely one-eighty-ed” Mina’s thinking about how to approach her personal statement. “I was able to hone it down to exactly why they should choose me, what I could bring to the program, what I was personally passionate about, and,” she says with a laugh, “what I kind of forgot to put in my first draft.”



The Writing Center helped Mina realize, “Okay, I need to target my audience—who I’m writing to—and then I need to craft my message to impact that audience.”

Mina was accepted into the communicative sciences and disorders program, and now she regularly uses the Writing Center for “so many different things,” including scholarship essays, literature reviews, research papers, and proposals. The Writing Center has had a lasting influence on how she approaches each writing task. “When I sit down to write,” she says, “I can almost hear a tutor’s voice in my head.”

A tutor’s objective is to empower writers, not enable them. Students should be able to apply the strategies they learn in a tutoring session to their writing outside of the tutoring session. When a tutor’s voice lingers long after, then the writer—not just the paper—has undergone a transformation.

Readers and Audience Awareness

Writing Center tutors remind students that skilled writers remain mindful of audience. Who is going to read this communication? A professor? A thesis committee? A potential employer? A knowledgeable peer? Current tutor and counselor education graduate student Lauren Leslie explains that the Writing Center prompts her to consider her readers. “When I write now,” Lauren says, “I write with a lot more focus on audience ear—how it will bounce off the audience.” When tutors dramatize the role of a potential reader, writers begin to understand writing as more than an act of following rigid rules; they begin to understand writing as an act of communication.

“There is something about someone else reading your paper and reacting to your ideas out loud that brings out the awkward areas. And the moments to be proud of.”
—**Sociology Undergraduate Student**

Working at the Writing Center has even helped Lauren as a college instructor. In nearly every session, tutors witness how students interpret professors’ writing prompts. As a former WRIT 101 instructor, Lauren used this unique insight to help her design clear, carefully scaffolded prompts. “Being a tutor has affected my view of how students might receive assignments,” Lauren says. “This influences me to create assignments that will be less confusing and more useful.”

Tutor Robert Lee emphasizes the social nature of writing: “Even if you’re a

pretty good writer, even if you are an honors student or a published professor, you still need readers. That's part of what we teach at the Writing Center. We teach people that they don't have to do this all on their own, that there's help available."

Simply put, researching, thinking, and writing are not solitary acts. With a resource like the Writing Center, no one needs to write alone.

Long-Term Growth

The lingering impact of the Writing Center is most evident in students who visit regularly. Tutor Jake Hansen has witnessed the growth of student writers over the course of their college careers. "It's nice when you have someone who keeps coming in over multiple semesters and multiple classes," Jake says. "As a tutor, you're able to see long-term growth, maybe more than you would as an instructor of a single course. Seeing students build strength as a writer over time is pretty magnificent to watch."

**"I'm the first person in my family to pass the eighth grade. I could have never gotten this far without the Writing Center. Total game changer."
—Social Work Undergraduate Student**

"College is a period of incredibly rapid development—of individual growth and academic growth and critical thinking," notes Jacob Coolidge, former tutor and graduate of UM's sociology master's program and the Alexander Blewett III School of Law. As a writing tutor, Jacob feels he was "able to be a positive influence and assist in that growth in a very dynamic way." Working at the Writing Center, Jacob explains, "has left this residual desire to be positively involved in students' education."

Jacob, who used the Writing Center as a UM student before becoming a tutor, describes the Writing Center as an "awesome beacon that demonstrates the student-driven desire to continually learn and improve."

Excellence in Teaching

The Writing Center is a resource for instructors as well as for students. As students flock to the Writing Center, faculty proactively adapt their courses to bring aspects of the Writing Center's philosophy into the curriculum.

Associate Professor of History and Director African-American Studies Tobin Miller-Shearer explains: "I have learned several principles through seminars and workshops that the Writing Center has conducted." As the director of UM's Pedagogy Project, Tobin understands that

supporting students' development as writers is a shared responsibility across all disciplines.

Evidence of the Writing Center's impact on the teaching of writing is embedded across the university. Faculty in departments such as biology, economics, geography, and marketing have implemented new teaching strategies as a result of Writing Center collaborations. Tobin notes a considerable effect on his teaching strategies, crediting the Writing Center with initiating what he calls "one of the biggest changes I've made as a professor." By limiting his feedback to a few critical and prioritized comments on essay drafts, he has noticed a significant improvement in his students' writing. He now focuses his early feedback first on higher order concerns such as thesis driven arguments, supportive evidence, and organization, pushing students to think more logically and clearly.

"The tutors are very knowledgeable and push me to revise my work. The best part is that they clarify the writing task and the steps I can take to accomplish it."

—History Undergraduate Student

The Writing Center's partnerships with faculty underscore the importance of writing across the curriculum and of writing as a muscle to be exercised across time and contexts.

Support for Teaching Assistants

International student and recent recipient of the Diversity Advisory Council Student Achievement Award Umut Arslan had been living in America for six years, but he struggled as a student writer before he reached out to the Writing Center. Now, with a doctorate in counselor education, he is embarking on a career in the field of education in Turkey. Umut credits the Writing Center with positively influencing his own writing process as well as his strategies for teaching students.

"I realized that I needed support with writing, but I didn't know how to get the support I wanted. I thought everything would be in my department. I came to the Writing Center expecting basic corrections, but after three or four visits, I noticed that the Writing Center had trained me to become a better thinker and writer." Umut, like many graduate students, discovered that a fruitful academic life requires developing a broad community of practice.

This positive impact did not stop with his own writing, and Umut realized that the Writing Center could also help him as a graduate student teach-

ing assistant. “I learned how to support students as writers. It influenced me both ways, as a student and a teacher.”

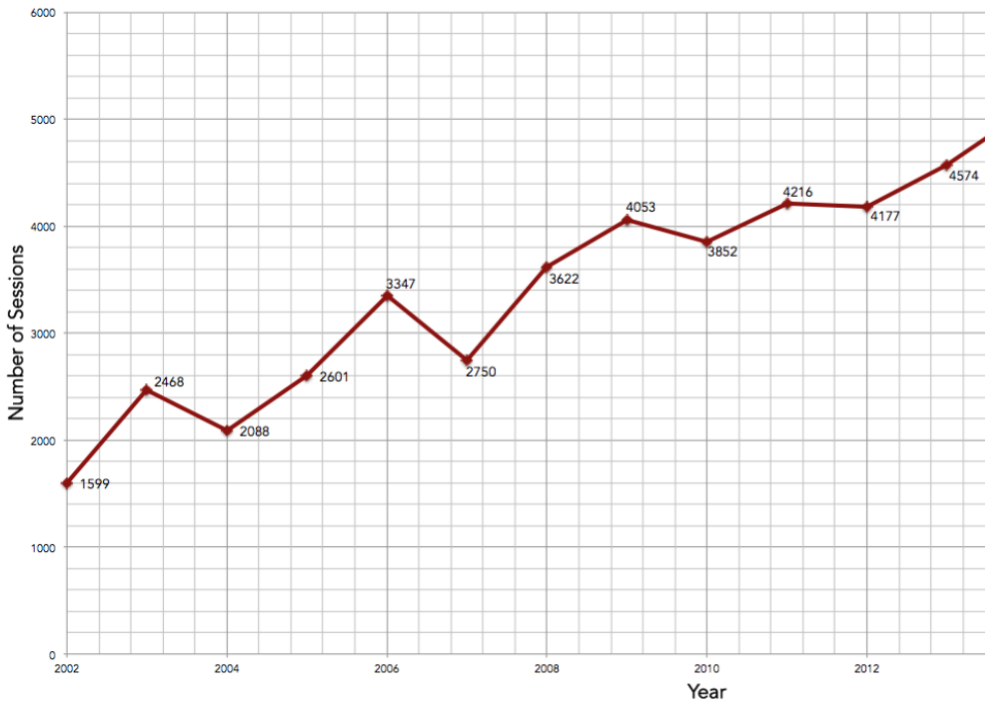
Cohen Ambrose—a recent tutor and recent graduate student and TA in theater studies—experienced a similar influence on both his own writing and his teaching. After less than a year of tutoring, Cohen noticed a significant change not only in his own writing but also in the way he interacts with students as an instructor of theater history and of learning strategies in higher education: “I have a much better understanding of how students read and sometimes misread assignments, and how teachers should design prompts. I am more aware of the kind of support I am obligated to provide.”

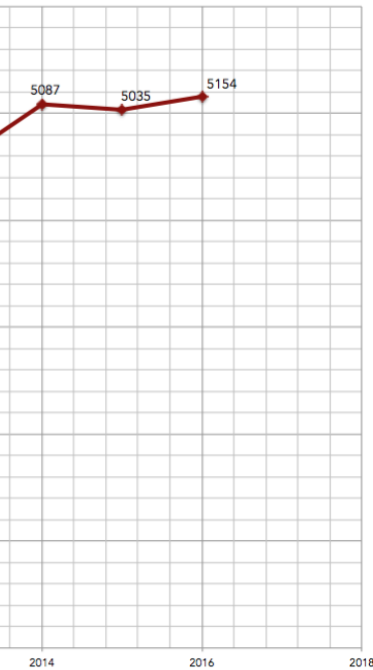
The Writing Center not only creates more competent writers, but also more competent educators. These purposeful, transformative intersections of tutors, students, and instructors sit at the heart of the Writing Center’s mission.

**“I’m the first person in my family
to pass the eighth grade.
I could have never gotten this far
without the Writing Center.
Total game changer.”**

—Social Work Undergraduate Student

Writing Center Tutoring Sessions Per Year





Fifteen Years of Transforming Writers

54,623 student
sessions facilitated



Blocked

Grace Krakow
UM Undergraduate

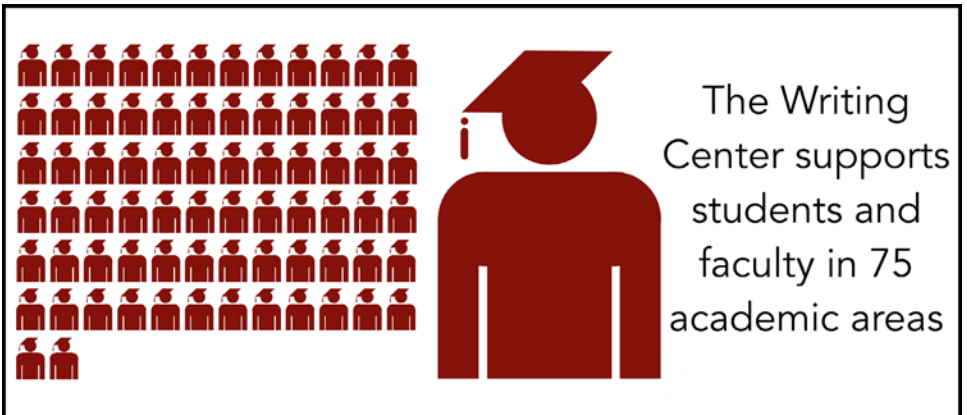
Scope

Multidisciplinary Focus

A common misconception among those unfamiliar with the work of the Writing Center is that it exists only to serve students whose classes are primarily in the liberal arts. In fact, visitors to the Writing Center are bound to overhear conversations about subjects as diverse as wildlife biology, linguistics, radiology, literature, and psychology. This multidisciplinary space is where communicators from across fields gather to think and write. The Writing Center is a resource for all students, faculty, and staff, as they work on everything from technical documents to creative works to presentations.

Communicating well matters in all disciplines. Serving writers from every school and college at UM, the Writing Center helps writers acquire not only general rhetorical knowledge but also writing strategies that are grounded in disciplinary ways of knowing.

“The Writing Center tutors are always attentive, knowledgeable, and most importantly, invested. The tutors are always willing to help, whether I have small questions about grammar or larger conceptual concerns. They’ve truly fostered a professional yet warm learning environment. Every time I visit the Writing Center, there’s a diverse range of students and learners around me—from the ESL international student to the non-traditional 50-year-old to the traditional freshman. It’s been a really important asset throughout the duration of my education at UM.”
—*Counselor Education Graduate Student*



A Diverse Team of Tutors

The greatest resource the Writing Center has to offer is its diverse set of tutors. Current tutor Max Kaiser believes, “If I were to be stranded on a desert island, these tutors would be some of the best people to be with. People here are ethically motivated.” Max explains that tutoring is “about interactions with other human beings. And listening. And being attentive. It’s about giving students time and being an advocate for them.”

The tutors are a diverse group of people. Some study fine arts while others study geology, literature, TESOL, or molecular biology. Writing Center tutors understand the expectations required of academic writing, as well as the complexities and rewards of research and communicating that research clearly.

“Tutors don’t try to push their ideas; they just help you expand yours.”
—Environmental Studies Undergraduate Student

Angela Hotaling, former tutor and philosophy student, explains, “Students have a lot of ideas and are very creative, but sometimes they lack the confidence to express these ideas in the ways they intend. As a tutor, I tried to help students build their confidence and more fully explore the implications of and assumptions behind their ideas. My job as a tutor was to guide them in expressing those ideas strongly and effectively.”

The relationship between student and tutor allows students to experience the collaborative nature of academic work. Writing Center tutor Philip Schaefer describes this relationship as an “interpersonal tether, where you bond with students because a light bulb turns on in their heads, and they realize they can do something they didn’t realize they could do before.”

These tutors who bring varied backgrounds and academic interests to their work in the Writing Centers create the conditions for students to be motivated and self-reflective learners.

Sidecar Project

While one-to-one tutoring sits at the heart of the Writing Center’s work, the Writing Center also offers a variety of other services. The Sidecar Project, created and administered by Jake Hansen, is one such service. The Sidecar Project follows a course-embedded tutoring model that aims to improve student writing practices, change faculty teaching practices, and expand tutor knowledge. For an entire semester, tutors facilitate ongoing

sessions with students from a specific class and collaborate with the professor to address any challenges students are having with their writing. Sidecars have been embedded into a variety of disciplines, from art to business management to economics.

As an undergraduate, Tim Weavers participated in a Sidecar during his senior-level Economics course. The Sidecar sessions helped him and his classmates structure stronger arguments. The Sidecar experience even inspired his future work. "I've taken my thesis many steps further," he explains, "and I'm actually working on a more sophisticated undergraduate thesis now. This is thanks to the Writing Center."

**"The Sidecar sessions provided the kind of timely feedback I needed to actually improve my ideas and change my paper. I learned why and how to make revisions instead of just copying suggested edits."
—Biology Sidecar Undergraduate Student**

The Sidecar Project also challenges students to evaluate research more critically. "Since I emphasize evidence-based writing," Bart Klika, an assistant professor in social work, comments, "I am interested in getting students to think about imperfections in evidence. The Sidecar tutors challenged the sources and the amount of research done by the students. The tutors also helped my students better understand the difference between summary and analysis, and how to integrate evidence from multiple sources."

During a Sidecar in biology, former tutor Susan Detwiler prompted students to think about audience awareness: "In Sidecar sessions, I asked students what information is necessary for the reader, whether that be background information or new information. I helped them value concision and clarify their points." Now a college instructor in upstate New York, Susan says she hasn't seen a course-embedded tutoring model like the Sidecar Project at any other university. "Sidecar is really unique," she says. "And I look. It's nowhere else. It's a special project to hold on to and develop."

**"The Sidecar tutor made me think. I couldn't get away with doing the minimum, and in Sidecar sessions I actually felt motivated to do more than the minimum."
—Management Undergraduate Student**

A collaboration of students, faculty, and tutors, the Sidecar Project truly achieves a trifecta of positive influence.

Variety of Services across Populations

In addition to the Sidecar Project, the Writing Center staff engage in a variety of other uniquely designed tutoring programs. Distance students, international students, Spanish language students, and student veterans are just a few of the populations who benefit from tutoring models designed to respond to specific student needs.

Synchronous online tutoring is available to distance students. Because the session is synchronous, students actively participate in their own learning, allowing students from across the region and in farther flung locations to reap the benefits of talking about writing.

The Writing Center's longest serving tutor, Tom Bateridge, began working at the Writing Center in 2003. With his extensive background in teaching English to speakers of other languages, Tom was hired to work specifically with international students. "After that first semester," Tom recalls, "I thought that a half-hour tutoring session was not long enough to meet with second-language students. So the following year, international student sessions were extended to one hour." International students find in the Writing Center a safe and critical space for language acquisition and for navigating American academic writing expectations.

A few years later, Tom recognized another need for students: writing tutoring for students communicating in Spanish. Students enrolled in Spanish language courses can now set up appointments with Tom to work on their essays, even while using a new language.

Most recently, the Writing Center began to offer writing tutoring in the VETS Office. Robert Lee, a veteran from the Vietnam era, tutors there once a week. A student veteran notes, "Robert helped me understand what my professor was looking for" when interpreting prompts. Another student veteran comments, "I plan to use the Writing Center for all of my papers. I appreciate having a writing tutor in the VETS Office."

When the Writing Center staff recognize a student need, they respond by thinking expansively about how best to deliver student support.

Jump Start Dissertation/Thesis Boot Camp

Recognizing the need for more robust graduate student writing support, Gretchen McCaffrey created the Jump Start program, a four-day writing

intensive workshop for graduate students working on their theses, dissertations, or prospectuses. Jump Start provides graduate students from any academic discipline an opportunity to discuss effective thesis/dissertation writing strategies, develop effective writing habits that will sustain them throughout their careers, and experience a supportive environment where they can talk to other graduate students.

Working in an environment with other graduate students allows Jump Start participants to realize they are not alone in what can seem like an overwhelming task. "One aspect the students like most," Gretchen explains, "is being able to see what other graduate students are going through. They have similar challenges."

Writing Center tutor Brianna Ewert reflects on her own writing process when she was completing her master's degree in environmental studies: "It is valuable to share your experiences and realize that you are not isolated."

Like many of her Jump Start peers, a graduate student who participated in a Jump Start program in spring 2016 felt she made considerable progress in her master's project: "I came into the workshop on Monday feeling stuck in my proposal. The tools and guidelines given to us have helped me identify my objective statement and how to develop it into a persuasive argument."

Graduate student demand for Jump Start has grown rapidly enough to warrant adding a fourth week-long session per academic year. "It would be fantastic," a graduate student comments, "if we could have a Jump Start 2.0 for those who have taken this workshop and want to continue with a second workshop the next semester." Perhaps a second-generation Jump Start is on the horizon.

Missoula College Learning Center

The Writing Center began partnering with the Learning Center at Missoula College in 2008. Director of the Learning Center, Betsy Cincoski, says that the Writing Center's presence at Missoula College enhances the Learning Center. Betsy has observed the student-tutor dynamic for several years now. "Some students prefer meeting with the same tutor several times," Betsy remarks, "while others like to meet with different tutors to gain different perspectives. There's really a relationship there, and you can see growth as students learn to spot issues in their writing."

Having Writing Center tutors available on both the mountain campus and Missoula College campus helps students feel more connected to UM as a whole. “More and more,” Betsy says, “students will also go to the mountain campus if they need other resources or want to see a specific tutor. It helps in so many ways. First, students get to see tutors and are working on their writing. Second, they become more comfortable with being at the larger campus and navigating that space.”

“When I use the Writing Center at Missoula College, the tutors are awesome and always make me feel comfortable. They give suggestions but also reiterate that I have figure out the best revisions based on my assignment and goal. Overall, they help me to write papers that are much more sophisticated.”

**—Missoula College
Nursing Student**

Wherever students learn—online, in the classroom, on the mountain campus, on the Missoula College campus—Writing Center tutors are present.

Writing Mentorship Program: TRiO Student Support Services

TRiO Student Support Services, a federally funded program designed to provide services for low-income and/or first-generation students as well as Americans with disabilities, helps UM students build a relationship with the Writing Center through the Writing Mentorship Program. This foundational relationship with the Writing Center persists as TRiO students progress through college.

TRiO Advising Coordinator and instructor, Janet Zupan, comments, “I’ve had students come back to me and say that the Writing Mentorship Program fostered a key relationship for them. This connection with Writing Center tutors is very important.”

Janet, who tutored at a different Writing Center earlier in her career, notes the usefulness of the Writing Center compared to options at other universities: “I find our Writing Center’s model much more effective. Their training approach and their approach with students is far more effective than what I had available as a student.”

The TRiO–Writing Center partnership showcases how cross-unit collaboration can promote engagement across a student’s academic tenure.

Partnerships with the Skaggs School of Pharmacy

An example of the Writing Center's reach can be found in the Skaggs School of Pharmacy, where pharmacy faculty have collaborated with the Writing Center to transform the writing students produce as part of the Drug Information Service program. This program provides a free resource for health care professionals and requires that students not only adeptly write in the discipline but also become flexible enough to write for an audience of non-expert patients.

Drug information responses, previously lengthy esoteric tomes, are now one-page documents of relevant, useable information that patients can understand. "We ask our students to consider the patient as audience and distill down what's most important: Hey, this drug is better than this drug, and here is why. Revising our strategies for teaching writing has changed everything," says Sherrill Brown, associate professor of pharmacy practice and Drug Information Service director.

This Writing Center collaboration is even achieving a degree of fame and influence among pharmacy educators. After presenting the changes the UM Writing Center helped to implement at several nationwide conferences, Sherrill has watched the approach spread to pharmacy schools across the country. "I finished my talk and someone came up to me from Kentucky. She said that she heard me talk the previous year and has instituted a similar program at her university."

"Our sessions with the tutor forced me to make hard choices about content and how to present that content to so that patients can actually digest and use it."

**—Drug Information Services
Pharmacy Student**

Sherrill explains the far reaching scope of the Writing Center's influence on students in the Skaggs School of Pharmacy: "It's not just about the improved drug information responses. Many pharmacy students have been using the Writing Center for years. If these students apply for residency, they get help with their cover letters and application essays. Scheduling is the only challenge. The Writing Center is so busy!"

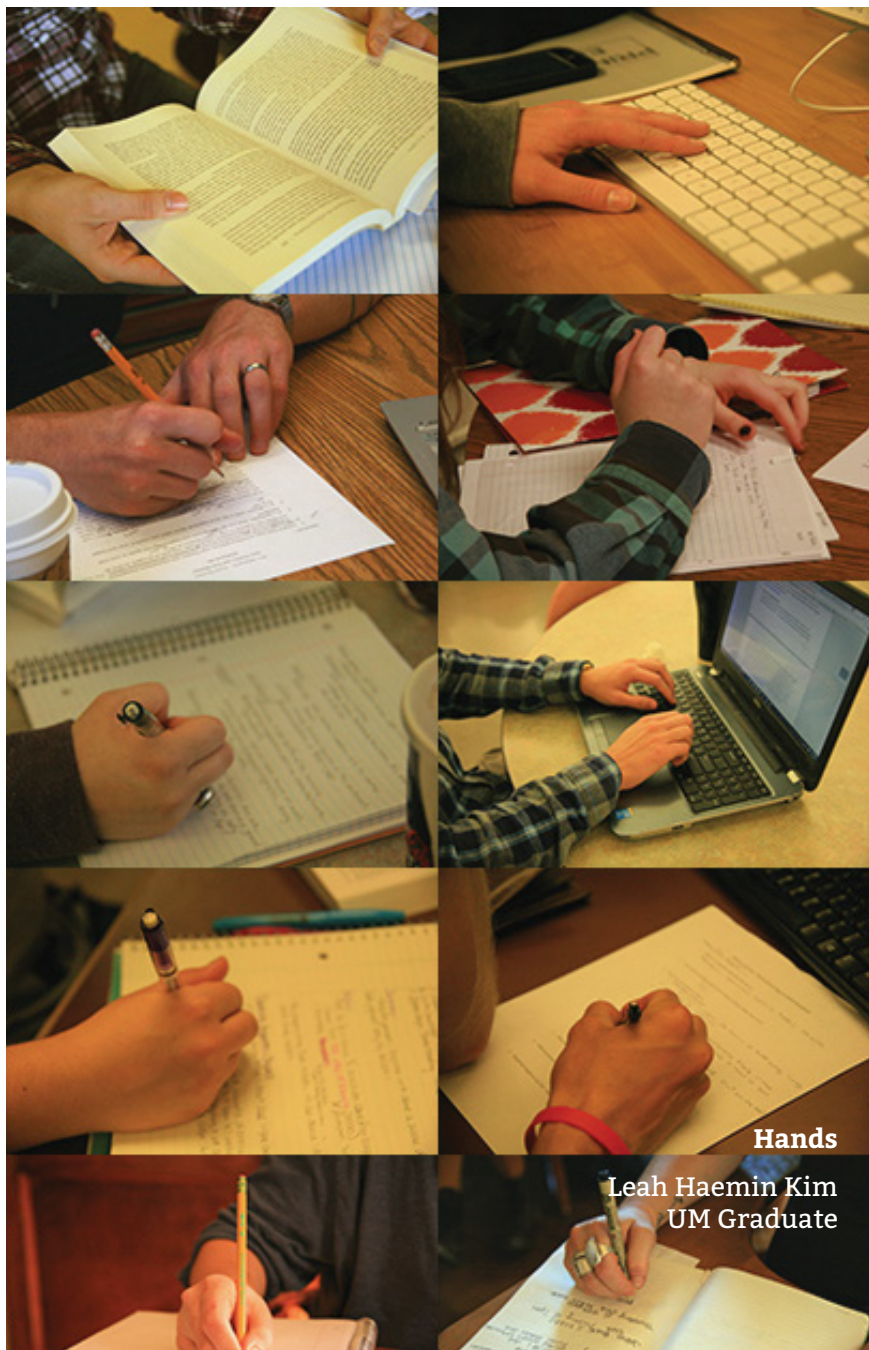
Whether at home in UM departments or through relationships with faculty who share their experiences, the UM Writing Center staff enhance writing and the teaching of writing across disciplines.

Communities of Practice

The Writing Center provides an environment that challenges thinkers to communicate well. Students and faculty from diverse backgrounds and academic disciplines come together in the Writing Center to become better thinkers, communicators, and educators. For fifteen years, the Writing Center has fostered the communities of practice that support excellence in education.

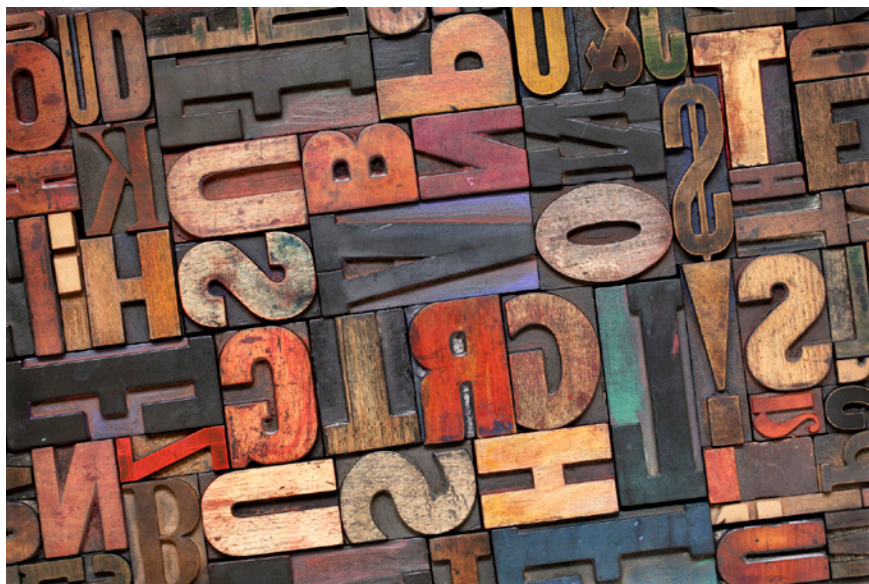


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Hands

Leah Haemin Kim
UM Graduate



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