Dear OWL Mail: Centering Writers' Concerns in Online Tutor Preparation

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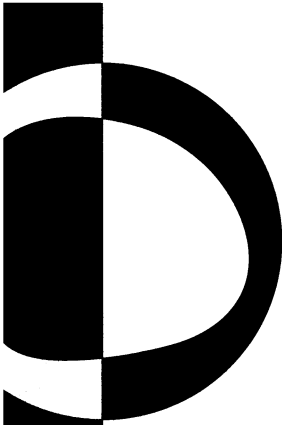Cristyn L. Elder

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Abstract

Much of the scholarship on writing centers narrates the stories of writers and their texts as told by tutors, administrators, and researchers. In an effort to bring writers' voices to the forefront, this empirical study examines the types of questions and concerns writers have about their writing as submitted through the Purdue Writing Lab's OWL Mail, an online, asynchronous question-and-answer email platform. Through the employment of what Richard H. Haswell (2005) calls RAD research— that which is replicable, aggregable, and data-supported—thousands of users' inquiries, submitted from 2006 to 2010, were analyzed and taxonomized into six primary question categories—Documentation Style, Grammar, Beyond the Scope of OWL Mail, Punctuation, Genre, and Lexicon—plus Other. The implications of these results and the ways they may inform tutor preparation in response to writers' email inquiries are discussed. Suggestions for future research are also provided.

> Dear OWL Mail,
>
> I have been looking everywhere and I cannot figure out how to cite an image I found online in APA format. How do I accurately accomplish this? Thank you.

Rhetoric and composition is a unique discipline in that its material focus is largely on the texts that writers create. As Joseph Harris, John D. Miles, & Charles Paine (2010) remind us in *Teaching with Student Texts: Essays Toward an Informed Practice*, writers' texts should be the central focus of our intellectual work in a writing class and, I will add, in writing centers. However, rather than emphasizing writers' concerns about the texts they create, much of writing center scholarship largely narrates the values of our own pedagogical, administrative, and research practices in relation to what *we* do *in response to* writers' texts. And when stories are told about writers and their texts, they are most often told by writing instructors, writing center tutors, administrators, and even those outside our discipline. What is often missing from these stories is the voice of the writers themselves and their articulations of their concerns about writing. Similar to the way that Michele Eodice, Anne Ellen Geller, & Neal Lerner (2016) seek to highlight students' voices in the *Meaningful Writing Project*, the following study gives prominence to writers' agentive inquiries about their own texts as submitted to Purdue's OWL Mail, an online, asynchronous question-and-answer service. This article begins with one such inquiry.

I first noticed the absence of writers' voices in relation to their concerns about writing while I was a graduate student at Purdue University specializing in writing program administration and working as the OWL Mail Coordinator for the Purdue OWL[1] (online writing lab). As the OWL Mail Coordinator, I was responsible for orienting undergraduate and graduate teaching assistants (TAs) to respond to inquiries received through Purdue's OWL Mail in addition to responding to these inquiries myself. However, in my preparation for the staff education I would be offering tutors, I found very little in writing center literature that focused on the kinds of inquiries writers make online and specifically through OWL Mail. Previous research on asynchronous, online tutoring has primarily examined the overall dynamics of the relationship between writer and tutor (Jackson, 2000) or has simply offered general

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1   For a history of the founding and development of the Purdue OWL, see Muriel Harris & Michael Pemberton (1995), Pemberton & Joyce Kinkead (2003), and Elizabeth Threadgill (2010).

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guidelines for online tutor response (Leahy, 1998; Remington, 2010; Shapiro, 2014). Other studies of online tutoring may include a linguistic analysis of conference interactions but make only brief mention of the writer's question in order to provide context for the detailed analysis of the tutors' responses (Wolcot, 1989; Rafoth, 2009; Kavadlo, 2013). Or, when a writer's text is quoted at length, it is part of a case study with a limited number of participants (usually one to three), and the focus is on the students' revised text in relation to the tutors' more thoroughly analyzed responses (Monroe, 1998; Hewett, 2005). An additional article reports students' inquiries in the form of aggregated types of errors (Terryberry, 2002). Perhaps where we hear the writer's voice more centered and clear is in David Coogan's (1998) "Email 'Tutoring' as Collaborative Writing." Coogan (1998) transcribes both his and his graduate student's responses in their email exchange as they work together through the student's questions during the writing of her master's thesis, providing us the clearest understanding of that student's concerns. But, alas, she is only one student.

In my own case, before discussing with my colleagues possible tutor responses to writers, I wanted to know more accurately what specific questions writers have about their own writing. In this way, I might use the *personal significance* of individual writers' concerns, as suggested by Linda Adler-Kassner (2008) in *The Activist WPA*, to telescope out to the "broader, *social significance*" of those concerns in order to better inform tutor preparation and response to these inquiries (p. 3). In other words, if I am to prepare tutors to respond to writer inquiries, I, and the other tutors, needed to have a clear understanding of what those individual and collective concerns are.

Due to the dearth of data collected about the inquiries of writers, and particularly as they are expressed through OWL Mail, I present the following case study of Purdue's OWL Mail. In the pages that follow, I describe why OWL Mail, an asynchronous question-and-answer email platform, is valuable to OWLs and online tutoring, identify what kinds of inquiries are made through OWL Mail, and suggest how those inquiries can strengthen tutor preparation for responding to OWL Mail. Due to the diversity and sheer number of Purdue's OWL Mail users, other writing centers with OWL Mail services will find this information useful, particularly as they consider how to research the needs of their own OWL Mail users and, in turn, work to prepare their tutors to address

writers' needs.[2] This study of writers' OWL Mail inquiries, with such a large data set, is the first of its kind.[3]

OWL Mail: A Valuable Tutor Technology

For some writing center folk, a question-and-answer service like OWL Mail as a form of tutoring might be a non-starter. As Beth L. Hewett (2015) explains in *The Online Writing Conference*, writing center literature privileges onsite tutoring practices and online platforms that best mimic those onsite practices. OWL Mail is not such a platform. Additionally, as Hewett (2015) indicates, "text-based" online writing instruction (OWI), in which I include OWL Mail, can be in conflict with three contemporary writing center theories privileged in writing center scholarship—expressivist theory, social construction theory, and postprocess theory—as well as the resulting pedagogical practices of these frameworks. For example, as Hewett (2015) describes, expressivists argue for students' retained "authorial ownership of their writing at all costs" (p. 5), which often results in a largely non-interventionist approach. Social constructivists encourage students to collaborate with their peers and more experienced writers, while encouraging writers to avoid appropriating "the product of collaboration at the risk of committing plagiarism" (Hewett, 2015, p. 5). Tutors are then instructed to avoid giving students *the* one correct answer. Finally, postprocess theorists maintain that "writing processes or activities cannot be taught because there is no such thing as a codifiable writing process" (Hewett, 2015, p. 5). Pedagogically, then, tutors are left to limit their comments to "idea-based content—critical, political, cultural, ideological—over writing processes and skills" (Hewett, 2015, p. 5).

These theories and practices are indeed antithetical to the kind of help writers traditionally seek through OWL Mail. A number of OWL Mail users *are* looking for direct intervention in response to what J. A. Jackson (2000) calls "writer-centered self questioning" about their

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2   See Tidewater Community College's (2016) directory of some of the OWLs found at additional academic institutions across the U.S. (and one in Canada).

3   Data collection and analysis for this study began in 2010 and covers inquiries collected from 2006–2010. In April 2016, OWL Mail was removed from Purdue's OWL. As explained by Dr. Harry Denny, the Director of the Purdue Writing Lab (2015 to present), many factors went into this decision, including the fact that already limited resources were being redirected away from Purdue's own students on campus as OWL Mail tried to serve thousands of writers annually from around the globe. However, the large data set archived on Purdue's server remains a valuable resource for understanding writers' concerns and values.

own texts (p. 2). As a form of agency, the writer may seek out tutors as expert readers and writers to help them choose, for clarity, between one of two versions of a sentence the author has written. Or, often times, non-native writers of English want the tutor to tell them which word choice is *the* correct answer for a given context. As these examples show, and as will become apparent in the results below, OWL Mail users often want "information-based material," not just assistance with generating, organizing, or expressing ideas (Jackson, 2000, p. 5).

Thankfully, Hewett (2015) asks us to reconsider the ways that some current, privileged writing center theories and practices limit the possibilities of instructional response. She argues for an "eclectic theoretical grounding" of OWI (p. 5) that allows for intervention in all aspects of students' writing, whether it be content, process, or product, and she encourages "explicit instructional response language that uses direct rather than indirect syntax" (p. 6). This kind of feedback is typically what OWL Mail users are looking for and is what they find to be of most help in response to their questions. In the same ways that Hewett (2015) argues in her text for a more flexible response in one-to-one online conferencing, I too call for a similar flexibility in our approach to responding to writers through OWL Mail, particularly as writers' targeted inquiries, and the question-and-answer, short-answer platform, require it.

For those who may still have doubts about the merits of OWL Mail as a tutor technology, here I identify the ways in which OWL Mail as a tutoring platform addresses a number of the principles outlined by the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) Committee for Best Practices in Online Writing Instruction (2013) in *A Position Statement of Principles and Example Effective Practices for Online Writing Instruction*. First, OWL Mail provides "[o]nline writing instruction that is universally inclusive and accessible" (OWI Principle 1). In her own text, Hewett (2015) provides an example of how she has used email to address the cognitive disabilities of one of her students, increasing this student's access to feedback and writing center resources. Also, as depicted in the OWL Mail inquiries below, OWLs provide multilingual writers from any global location access to native and non-native English speaking experts of writing when writers may not find these experts available in their own local contexts. Furthermore, OWL Mail helps to address the digital divide, when students either don't have access to or familiarity with more sophisticated technology or platforms or, frankly, just don't have the bandwidth to use those platforms or applications.

OWL Mail also offers "personalized and interpersonal online communities to foster student success" (OWI Principle 11) (CCCC

Committee for Best Practices in OWI, 2013). As the rationale for this principle states, online writing centers (OWCs) and their resources help to create community among students and teachers and is driven by faculty and institutions. OWL Mail is just one more aspect of OWCs that helps to foster this sense of community. Perhaps this is most obvious in the way that users of Purdue's OWL Mail usually address their emails to tutors as "Dear OWL Mail," indicating that the platform itself takes on a kind of human identity as writers reach out.

Furthermore, OWL Mail provides students "support components through online/digital media as a primary resource" (OWI Principle 13), although some writers may not have access to the secondary "onsite support components" also recommended as part of this principle. However, this latter point is largely why writers are accessing OWL Mail in the first place—because they lack access to onsite resources (CCCC Committee for Best Practices in OWI, 2013).

OWL Mail Inquiries: A Collection of Writers' Concerns

So what kinds of questions do OWL Mail users have about writing? In my initial attempt to answer this question to inform my preparation of tutors, I selected sample email inquiries that I simply felt were representative of the majority of questions we received, such as this one about MLA documentation style:[4]

> Location: [State] University
>
> Subject: MLA poetry annotation
>
> My professor has assigned a half-dozen poems to read and wants an annotated bibliography on those poems as the assignment. This is to be done in MLA style. I cannot find an MLA poetry reference example. Can you help?

I also included sample inquiries that tutors may find a challenge to answer:

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4   In order to maintain the "look and feel" of the writers' original inquiries, throughout this article I have not corrected any errors that may be found in these example emails.

> Dear Colleague,
>
> I am writing this letter to ask for help in teaching English language and finding English language materials (Books, references, etc). My name is Amid. I am a Palestinian English language teacher at the [...] Secondary school in Jericho. It is in the occupied territories in the West Bank in Palestine. I teach students aged 16 to 18 (Intermediate and advanced). I give 26 English language lessons a week and teach around 200 students annually [....]

However, the process of preparing these sample inquiries led me to think about how I might more rigorously identify the types of inquiries we receive from writers, rather than rely on instinct and my own personal experience answering OWL Mail. In this way, I might bring what Chris M. Anson (2008) refers to as "intelligent design" to our tutor preparation program, with a reliance on evidence to inform our practices, rather than belief. That is when I decided to analyze systematically, through what Richard H. Haswell (2005) calls RAD research—that which is replicable, aggregable, and data-supported—the kinds of questions we received from writers. This large, data-rich study would help me answer more accurately why people use Purdue's OWL Mail, while also pointing to implications for other OWCs that employ OWL Mail as a tutoring technology. Furthermore, by addressing the gap in the literature on this topic, this research could help address the following CCCC OWI Principles when it comes to OWL Mail as a type of OWI:

- OWI Principle 14: Online writing lab administrators and tutors should undergo selection, training, and ongoing-professional development activities that match the environment in which they will work.
- OWI Principle 15: OWI/OWL administrators and teachers/tutors should be committed to ongoing research into their programs and courses as well as the very principles in this document. (CCCC Committee for Best Practices in OWI, 2013)

Methods

Data collection. The data examined for this IRB-approved[5] empirical study are the emails submitted to Purdue's OWL Mail and archived

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5   Purdue University IRB; Protocol #1005009293

automatically on the Purdue Writing Lab server. As referenced above, OWL Mail is an asynchronous, email-based question-and-answer service. Purdue's OWL Mail served thousands of writers per year, providing them the opportunity to ask Purdue Writing Lab tutors questions they have about writing. The types of questions writers posed were for personal, academic, or professional purposes. The writers who used OWL Mail were not only found on Purdue's campus but also across the U.S. and around the world. Purdue OWL Mail users included students, teachers, parents, librarians, people in government or industry, and additional private users. They were both native and non-native speakers of English. The content of users' inquiries varied greatly and ranged, for example, from questions about appropriate documentation style (as with the example that begins this article) to questions about word usage (e.g., "What is the difference between using preventive and preventative?") to settling disputes between coworkers about syntax (e.g., from the office of the [U.S. State] General Assembly, "There is a question here about the correctness of .5 cent versus .5 cents. Is it singular or plural? We need an answer to settle a disagreement between the editors and the attorneys."). The emails analyzed below range from May 1, 2006, to April 30, 2010, the dates for which the Purdue Writing Lab had data for the complete academic year, including summer sessions, at the initiation of this study. In Table 1 below, the center column illustrates the number of emails archived for each year, for a total of 14,814 emails for the four years. From this total, 1,389 emails were randomly sampled,[6] as shown in the right column, providing 95% confidence with an error rate of 5%[7] that this sample accurately represents the four-year archive.

Table 1. Number of Archived and Randomly Sampled Emails from 2006–2010

OWL Mail Dates	Total Number of Emails Archived	Random Sample of Emails with 5% Error and 95% Confidence
2006 to 2007	4,616	355
2007 to 2008	3,933	350
2008 to 2009	2,825	338
2009 to 2010	3,440	346
Totals	**14,814**	**1,389**

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6   Stat Trek's (2017) Random Number Generator used for this study can be found at http://stattrek.com/Tables/Random.aspx.

7   The Survey Random Sample Calculator by CustomInsight (2017) can be found at http://www.custominsight.com/articles/random-sample-calculator.asp

The information collected from each sampled email included the date of the email, the extension of the author's email (e.g., "@edge-wood.edu"), and the author's complete inquiry. This information was then entered into a table for each academic year analyzed.

Coding writers' inquiries. After selecting the emails to be analyzed, I created a table with the following five columns: a unique identifier for the email and 1st question type, 2nd question type, 3rd question type, and 4th question type. (While rare, some emails did include more than four questions, requiring additional columns. The greatest number of questions recorded in an email was seven.) Each question asked in an email was categorized separately, under 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th question type.

To test the transparency and usefulness of the question types I had created, I invited three colleagues, all of whom had answered OWL Mail before, to code the same email inquiries I had, using the same question types. Based on their feedback, some question types were either more clearly defined or renamed, and some new question types were added. Each question type was defined as specifically as possible so as to make each type mutually exclusive. After receiving feedback from my colleagues using these question types, I recoded the questions in the emails for the first year (2006–2007) and then coded the questions for the following three years (2007–2008, 2008–2009, 2009–2010). After coding these questions, I again asked my colleagues to use the question types we had established to code a random sampling from the last three years to test our level of agreement. Following this second group-coding session, one revision was made: "thesis" was renamed "thesis statement" in order to disambiguate questions made about a thesis statement from reference to a master's thesis.

Only one question type is attributed to each unit of analysis. A unit of analysis is equal to one question asked by a writer that requires one distinct answer —versus writers' questions that further clarify or elucidate an original question. One email may contain more than one question or unit of analysis. However, each question is labeled with only one question type.

Results

In this section, I report on the number of questions and frequency of question types for the four years of this study.

OWL Mail user questions analyzed. As illustrated in Table 2 below, a total of 1,514 questions received in 1,389 emails from 2006 to 2010 via OWL Mail were analyzed for this study.

Table 2. Number of OWL Mail User Questions Analyzed from Randomly Selected Emails for 2006–2010

| OWL Mail Dates	Total Number of Emails Archived	Random Sample of Emails with 5% Error and 95% Confidence	Total Number of Questions Analyzed
2006 to 2007	4,616	355	404
2007 to 2008	3,933	350	373
2008 to 2009	2,825	338	365
2009 to 2010	3,440	346	372
Totals	**14,814**	**1,389**	**1,514**

Each of the 1,514 questions asked by writers was coded using a list of 60 question types. For ease of reporting and interpretation of these results, question types of a smaller, similar nature (e.g., comma, colon, hyphen, etc.), have been aggregated into one question-type category (e.g., punctuation), as described in alphabetical order in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Final Aggregated Question Categories and Their Definitions

Question Category	Definition
Beyond the Scope of OWL Mail	Includes requests for help or information that is unrelated to writing or requires more from the tutor than is feasible. Such requests include asking the tutor to do one of the following: • interpret the requirements of a specific writing assignment that necessitates in-depth knowledge of the writer's local context • explain what the writer should write • provide content or sources for a research topic • read and comment on a writer's document beyond the paragraph level • help with one's English language skills or writing more generally, including help with test prep (e.g., TOEFL, GRE) • explain how to use hardware (e.g., one's computer) or software (e.g., Microsoft Word, Adobe InDesign).

Question Category	Definition
Documentation Style	Includes requests for help with a citation for a specific source (e.g., a book), either in-text or on the bibliographic page, for APA, MLA, Chicago, or a specific citation style not identified. Documentation style also includes questions related to the formatting of a document (e.g., header, page numbers, appendix) as prescribed by the conventions of a particular citation style.
Genre	The writer provides a specific or general indication of the genre they are working in and asks what a convention for that genre might be.
Grammar	A question about the usage of articles, modals, parts of speech, passive voice, prepositions, pronouns, relative clauses, run-on sentences, sentence structure (beyond the word-level), subject/verb agreement, verb tense, or word order.
Lexicon	The writer provides an example word choice and asks if the writer is using the word correctly; the writer asks which word to use between two choices (e.g., affect vs effect); or the writer provides a definition and asks which word would be best to use with a particular definition.
Other	Questions grouped under Other were asked on average over the four years of this study less than 5% of the time. The category includes incomplete inquiries that required clarification as well as requests for the following: • help navigating the Purdue OWL • expressing adulation for the Purdue OWL • writing coherent and cohesive paragraphs • defining or avoiding plagiarism • proofreading a sentence without reference to what might be incorrect • critically reading a text • reproducing OWL content • requesting recommendations for writing-related resources • clarifying OWL Mail services offered • spamming • asking how to spell a word • evaluating the quality of one's thesis statement • requesting a dictionary definition of a word.
Punctuation	A question about capitalization, commas, colons, ellipses, hyphens, or quotation marks. This category also includes general questions about punctuation in which the writer does not specify the kind of punctuation under consideration, or the question may relate to two kinds of punctuation and the ways they work together.

As depicted in Figure 1, the greatest number of aggregated question types averaged for 2006–2010 ranks as follows: Documentation Style (36%), Grammar (13%), Beyond the Scope (10%), Punctuation (7%), Genre (6%), and Lexicon (5%), plus Other (23%). As noted above, the second largest aggregated question type, Other, refers to a combination of question types asked by users less than 5% of the time on average over four years.

Figure 1: Frequency Percentages for Aggregated Question Types Averaged Over Four Years (2006–2010)
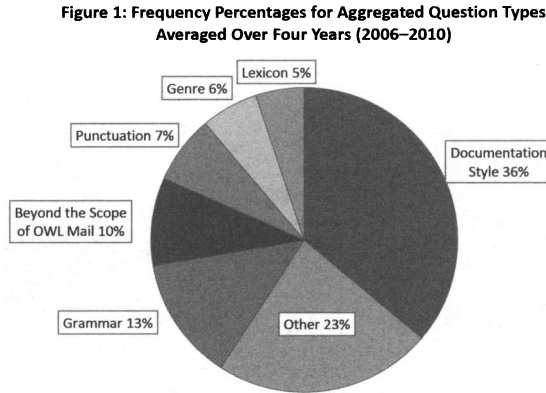
OWL Mail Inquiries: A Resource for Tutor Preparation

The data collected on inquiries made through OWL Mail are useful for preparing tutors for the kinds of questions they may receive when responding to OWL Mail. Clearly, as suggested by the results above, tutors will find it very important to have a solid understanding of various documentation styles and formatting, knowledge of English grammar and mechanics, punctuation, various genre conventions, and lexis.

However, having knowledge of the less frequently asked questions will be useful as well. As shown in Figure 1, the less-frequently-asked question types aggregated under Other make up 23% of the kinds of questions tutors may receive. Therefore, familiarity with these less frequent but consistent concerns (e.g., asking for resources [3.95%], using invention strategies [3.25%], developing a thesis statement [1.18%]) or at least knowing where to find resources related to these topics—either on the OWL or in resource books, for example—would be helpful to tutors and increase their effectiveness and efficiency in responding to writers.

Documentation style: A central concern. The number one concern of writers accessing OWL Mail is documentation style (36%).

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Most documentation style guides read like a list of formulas that writers apply for a particular source by filling in the blanks (e.g., author, title of source, publication date). Writers have difficulty when they are given these formulas but the source either does not provide all of the information the writer needs to mimic the model, or there is not a model for the exact kind of source the writer wants to reference. Even applications such as Zotero (Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, 2015) or EndNote (Clarivate Analytics, 2017), which automatically format citations both within text and at the end of a document, do not offer citation examples for every potential resource a writer may want to cite. Therefore, rather than simply prescribe for writers a particular formula for a particular source, tutors need to supplement their response with an explanation of the rhetorical reasons for why we cite sources (e.g., to strengthen our own ethos by showing familiarity with the larger conversation about a topic or to provide readers reference to primary sources they may want to read). Tutors can then provide writers with a heuristic, or a list of questions writers can ask themselves about a particular source they want to cite in order to accomplish the above rhetorical goals. In the YouTube video *How to Cite a Cereal Box*, Martine Courant Rife (2010) offers writers an example of such a heuristic in practice when citing the source of a medium or technology that lacks a formal citation model. With this approach and readers' needs in mind, writers can more confidently cite their sources, even when they don't have an exact model to follow.

Understanding writers' concerns about grammar. After Documentation Style—and with the exclusion of the heterogeneous question types included under Other—Grammar (13%) is the second most frequent question type among OWL Mail users. Despite grammar being one of the top categories of question types asked, the metalanguage OWL Mail users often employ to express their questions about grammar reveals users' often sophisticated understanding of English grammar. Note, for instance, this writer's use of the grammatical term "antecedent" in the following OWL Mail inquiry, which suggests a certain level of familiarity with the grammar rules for the privileged standardized written American English (SWAE) dialect:

Subject: How can I effectively use pronouns in paragraphs?

Hi, I have a question regarding pronouns. I know that pronouns take place or substitute a noun or another pronoun in a sentence. My confusion is, when I'm writing a paragraph, how can I use pronouns to demonstrate unity among sentences? Can I use 'IT' for an antecedent for each SENTENCE (unlikely...) or can I re-introduce the antecedent from time to time in subsequent sentences?

Simple example: A tree is a plant. IT grows taller throughout the years. IT thrives on sunlight. IT provides shade... Thank you for your attention and I hope you can clarify my confusion!!

At other times, writers seem quite aware of a grammatical error and want help finding the grammatical term to describe it, as this example from an OWL Mail user illustrates:

Subject: bad pronoun?what is this common mistake?

hi there, I joined a 'fight against bad grammar' club on facebook today and immediately noticed their erroneous first 'agreement:'

1. The advent of net-speak has led to a disturbing trend: the degradation of our grammar as an English-speaking people.

Now any good grammarian can see, as I do, that this sentence technically implies that grammar itself is an 'english-speaking people.'What rule does this sentence break?what's it called?though I can spot it, I can't name it.thank you in advance for your help (not your help in advance)!

As reflected in the two grammar inquiries above, a percentage of OWL Mail users have a formal and sophisticated understanding of SWAE grammar rules and the metalanguage used to describe them. Therefore, it would benefit online tutors to develop their own understanding of these prescriptive rules and terms. Much of this happens informally as tutors reach for resources to help them explain prescriptive grammar points to writers; however, grammar instruction should also be a formal part of tutor preparation. What I found to be effective was

to collect emailed grammar questions from writers and make these questions a part of the periodic OWL Mail meetings we had over the course of the semester. Tutors accessed OWL pages for reference as they worked together to "solve" the grammar question and craft a reply to the writer. Tutors were encouraged to include a link to the OWL pages or reference to the print resources they used in their reply so that 1. the writer can see that the grammar knowledge the tutor has is not innate or hidden but available to the public; and 2. the writer can read more about and complete exercises on the grammar structure under question in order to further their understanding.

Responding to inquiries beyond the scope of OWL Mail. Some of the most interesting kinds of inquiries received through OWL Mail are those identified as Beyond the Scope of OWL Mail (10%). These inquiries demonstrate that a tutor may need to be more than just a writing coach and that their professional development should help them prepare for the parts of their jobs that require a practical wisdom beyond training. Several of these inquiries (3.5%) really pull at the reader's heartstrings as students (or their parents), for example, write in with requests for help passing an exam or developing one's language skills more generally. At other times, OWL Mail receives submissions from people simply reaching out:

Subject: I am afraid

I have lost my last job for two monthes. I leave my company because my boss didn't give me the promised wage. In fact, i just graduated last year. I have a management degree and I am sure I work hard in my position. What a pity that I havn't get a job again after two monthes passing. I am afraid I can't get a job so I am unhappy all the day. Would you tell me how I can spirit up myself?

While Beyond the Scope requests lie outside the services of OWL Mail, these inquiries do not go unanswered. Emails like the one above demonstrate how important it is to recognize the heavy responsibility tutors sometimes feel in responding to online inquiries. A discussion of how to answer such requests is an important aspect of tutors' professional development. As with instructors teaching composition courses, tutors are working with real people with complex lives, and sometimes the complexities of those lives enter into the professional relationship between tutor and writer. We need to be sure to prepare tutors in how to

respond to such complicated inquiries. They are often the most import-ant answers we give as people turn to OWL Mail perhaps because they don't see any other resources available to them. Those who have worked in a writing center understand that they'll encounter these seemingly impossible-to-prepare-for situations. Such OWL Mail examples could be used to help tutors become aware of the range of questions they may receive and develop a disposition for responding to inquiries in a supportive way without necessarily feeling responsible for providing a solution to the "problem."

Other seemingly less dire inquiries can be similarly overwhelming to tutors due to the complicated nature of a required response to a user's request, as illustrated by the following inquiry:

> Subject: College level writting
>
> Hello,
>
> I need assistance in corrective writting.College level writting is a new lanuage to me, due to the fact I speak and think more urban. Due to my environment location learning to use medaphors and other tools for writting I am unsure of.
>
> Can your website help me?

In its simplest form, the user is asking how the tutor can help the user learn college writing (3.47%). This is a tall order and is of course difficult to answer in a single email response. However, as this inquiry and the one above illustrate, sometimes the best response to an inquiry is pointing OWL Mail users in the direction of more appropriate resources or helping those users define more specifically their issue as it relates to writing.

Another type of Beyond the Scope inquiry is one that relates to a class that the writer is taking (1.53%). These are difficult to respond to because the questions are usually so contextually specific. However, as seen in the example below, writers sometimes turn to OWL Mail tutors when the student no longer feels the instructor is accessible:

> I would ask my teacher but she isn't talking to me…anyways, this is for a 300 level sociology class at [state public comprehensive university]. The final 10 pg research paper is due May 1st but due today is a brief explanation of your topic and a list of preliminary resources/references. How long should it be and how many references? About a page and 6–10 references? The syllabus also states, 'do not obtain more than 40% of your references from online sources' does that mean journal articles from indexes and databases are online? I know these are teacher specific questions but your opinion is appreciated.

Sometimes the emails we receive from writers can vilify the instructor referenced or ask the tutor to choose sides between a student and an instructor. These types of inquiries can be tricky to navigate. Tutor development should include discussion of the appropriate role a tutor is advised to take in these situations.

Punctuation as an area of concern. Punctuation (7%) is the fourth largest aggregated category —when excluding Other. Often in terms of punctuation, writers are simply looking for the "what is correct" answer, as in the example inquiry below on hyphens (.53%) from an OWL Mail user:

> Ahoi Boilermaker and Hail Purdue Alma Mater amidst the corn fields of the Hoosierland! Question coming from an alumnus Boilermaker: What's the correct way of writing such phrases as:
>
> 3-page long extended abstract,
>
> 5-year-old kindergarten girl,
>
> 4 year bachelor study etc
>
> Which one is correct, which one wrong??? I stink at remembering the difference of writing such phrases in German and in English. In German it is easy to remember, you just don't put any hyphen in between. You write, e.g.: 5jähriges Mädchen But in English everybody has his or her own "correct grammar style."
>
> Please help me OWL Associates!
>
> Cheers from Istanbul, the Cauldron at the Bosporus!

Rather than simply offering a yes/no or correct/incorrect response to this question, tutors should include in their response an explanation of how seemingly simple squiggles on a page carry meaning. For example, in response to this writer, the tutor might explain how the positioning of the hyphen (or lack of a hyphen) helps to communicate meaning to one's reader, as in "3-page long abstract" refers to one abstract that is three pages long whereas "3 page-long abstracts" refers to three abstracts that are each one page long. In this way, tutors can highlight for writers the need to keep the reader in mind when using punctuation, as punctuation will carry meaning for the reader. These kinds of explanations are likely to be more useful to writers rather than simply giving them a rule for hyphens that might not work in all circumstances. In my own tutor preparation workshops, I like to use the popular Dear John exercise found many places on the Internet (and in Appendix A) as a way to help tutors themselves see the ways punctuation can drastically change the meaning of a sentence. Tutors are then able to pass this understanding on to writers.

Of course tutor preparation should also include a review of standard punctuation conventions so that tutors know the rules well and can reference them in their responses. I have found Diana Hacker & Nancy Sommers' (2013) *The Bedford Handbook* a particularly useful resource, as the explanations are clear and include follow-up practice activities. Additionally, tutors should be encouraged to provide writers with citations in their responses so, as with grammar questions, writers will understand there are resources that they themselves can access for their own continued use, making OWL Mail users more autonomous writers. Finally, by encouraging tutors to include a citation, we discourage tutors from simply responding to writers with "a feeling" about what they deem is correct. Requiring a resource strengthens the credibility (and accuracy) of the tutor's response.

Writers' concerns related to genre. Genre (6%), the fifth most frequent question type (excluding Other), is closely related to documentation style and grammar in that OWL Mail users often also view this aspect of writing as formulaic. The following are three examples of users' inquiries regarding genre conventions:

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Hullo Tutor

My question:How do you write a project proposal. [if given a format,

will be o.k]

thanks

---

how long does a statement of teaching philosophy suppose to be?

When sending a business letter and noting the topic of the letter, such as,

RE: 1997 Warranty for French Door

Does that line go before or after the salutation?

Thanks,

Because genre conventions can often appear convoluted to writers, it is important for tutors to share with writers that genre conventions are flexible and may differ depending on the writers' rhetorical situation. Sharing ready examples of how one genre can adhere to differing conventions (e.g., page length, format, tone) pending the context will be useful to writers, as there is not a single right answer to the example general inquiries above. Tutors may then, again, provide OWL Mail users with a heuristic, or list of useful questions, to help direct them to an answer. For example, who is requiring the type of writing you are doing? Are examples of similar, previous writings available? Are there specific guidelines or conventions that have been laid out by your teacher, institution, or organization that you could reference? Sometimes it is enough for the tutor to simply raise the writer's awareness to the fact that such inquiries often do not have one right answer and that the better response may come from the writer's own specific context (e.g., from one's boss, teacher, or work colleague).

Lexicon: An additional question type. Finally, questions related to Lexicon (5%) are often submitted by users who are looking for an "expert" opinion. These questions can indicate that, for some

people, the only "living" language reference they may have are the tutors who answer OWL Mail. For instance, in the inquiry below, the writer asks a relatively simple question, one that perhaps a native speaker would sound out aloud to themselves or one that an individual would simply turn to a colleague about. However, one who is writing in an environment without many "expert" users of English nearby might be more likely to submit such an inquiry:

> Which is preferable, "We're looking for someone with good communication Skills" or "good communications skills"? Thank you.

In my own preparation of tutors, I sometimes use these example inquiries to illustrate how often we depend on our "native or native-like speakerness" and the way things sound to provide the correct answer. However, I then emphasize for tutors that it is more useful when we can point writers to a rule or a resource to explain issues of word choice or word form. It is also important for tutors to understand that, as Cynthia Linville (2004) points out in "Editing Line by Line," for non-native speakers of English, some language aspects including prepositions, articles, and precise word usage may be "untreatable," as they take years to learn and may never be fully grasped. Therefore, the appropriate way to respond to OWL Mail users in these instances is to simply provide them with the correct word choice. This is important to communicate to tutors, for privileged writing center theories and practices, as discussed above, may largely discourage giving writers *the* correct response.

Tutoring with Semantic Integrity

The majority of OWL Mail users' inquiries, as reflected above, might best be said to relate to usage and style, or aspects that have been traditionally ascribed to writing as product. Process-type questions, such as Invention (3.25%), Thesis Statement (1.18%), Plagiarism (0.4%), Paragraphing (0.33%), and Paraphrasing (0.08%), are each asked by users only less than 5% of the time. OWL Mail users' emphasis on product-like features of writing is likely due to the asynchronous and short question-and-answer nature of OWL Mail's platform. As Hewett (2015) notes, online tutor preparation has typically perpetuated the privileging of theoretical frameworks and practices with a focus on process (e.g., empiricism, social constructivism, post process) that work well in face-to-face and synchronous environments. However, the product-based, textual na-

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ture of tutoring through OWL Mail often requires a different response. Therefore, our preparation of OWL Mail tutors, and their responses to writers, should rely on a more eclectic approach, including responses to process, content, *and* product. In order to address the disconnect between the more accepted process-based approaches to responding to writers and that which OWL Mail as an online question-and-answer tutor technology requires, we might employ what Hewett (2015) calls "semantic integrity" (p. 4). As Hewett (2015) explains, through semantic integrity we create

> writing commentary and interactions that accurately address what students need to know in order to develop and improve their writing – on a case-by-case, problem-centered basis. . . . Ideally, online commentary that has sematic integrity does not hint or ask students to guess at what they are supposed to be learning; it is not evasive nor does it poorly address the subject matter. Rather it demonstrates respect for students' intellectual capabilities by explicitly addressing a session's expectations and goals. (p. 4)

As we employ semantic integrity in our responses to OWL Mail users, these responses will often look quite different from those we use with writers face-to-face, through synchronous online platforms, or through responses to students' papers in text or within the margins. They will depict a more direct intervention. As they should.

Areas of Future Research

The primary value of this study is that it is an initial foray into a new source of data—writers' relatively unfiltered voices of concern about their writing as submitted through OWL Mail. This study offers other online writing centers an example of how local, institutional RAD research on the needs of OWL Mail users can inform tutor preparation and development.

However, there is much we still do not know about OWL Mail users and the kinds of writing they are doing. Future researchers could expand the method used in this study by combining it with, for example, a pop-up survey that writers can complete voluntarily after submitting their inquiry to OWL Mail, through which demographic information about users and their specific contexts or purposes for writing could be collected. Alternatively, OWL Mail platforms could require a brief login, which would allow OWL Mail tutors to quickly access a user's profile, enabling tutors to respond more effectively to writers' inquiries.

Additionally, one might complement the above methods with the use of interviews, as modeled by Deborah Brandt (2015) in *The Rise of Writing*. Interview data from OWL Mail users could provide a greater depth of understanding about users' reasons for and relationships to writing in various contexts, whether personal, academic, or professional, while offering more breadth to Brandt's (2015) study, in which she interviews 90 writers about their writing practices. As Brandt (2015) notes herself about the limitations of her study, "many important forms of experience, writing, work, and change in the wider society are omitted, because they did not arise in the finite universe of data [she] worked with and beyond which [she] did not go" (p. 11). Through the thousands of writers OWL Mail serves each year, this "universe of data" could be greatly expanded.

Future research could also evaluate both writers' inquiries and the effectiveness of tutors' responses to those inquiries through discourse analysis and by surveying OWL Mail users about their satisfaction with the responses they receive. Finally, other research might also include usability studies of OWLs. For example, it would be interesting to track users' movements throughout the pages of the OWL in order to understand how writers use those web pages in relation to OWL Mail. By assessing and strengthening the design of OWL pages, we might help writers become less reliant on OWL Mail tutors and, ultimately, more autonomous writers. In the meantime, by making writers' stated concerns the central focus of our research and our responses to OWL Mail, we may further strengthen our own writing center practices more broadly.

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Appendix A

Directions: Punctuate the letter below so that it makes sense. Do not add any words; just add punctuation.

DEAR JOHN
I WANT A MAN WHO KNOWS WHAT LOVE IS ALL ABOUT YOU ARE GENEROUS KIND THOUGHTFUL PEOPLE WHO ARE NOT LIKE YOU ADMIT TO BEING USELESS AND INFERIOR YOU HAVE RUINED ME FOR OTHER MEN I YEARN FOR YOU I HAVE NO FEELINGS WHATSOEVER WHEN WE'RE APART I CAN BE FOREVER HAPPY WILL YOU LET ME BE YOURS GLORIA

ANSWERS:

With Punctuation, Version 1:

Dear John,
I want a man who knows what love is all about. You are generous, kind, thoughtful. People who are not like you admit to being useless and inferior. You have ruined me for other men. I yearn for you. I have no feelings whatsoever when we're apart. I can be forever happy. Will you let me be yours?
Gloria

With Punctuation, Version 2:

Dear John,
I want a man who knows what love is. All about you are generous, kind, thoughtful people who are not like you. Admit to being useless and inferior. You have ruined me. For other men I yearn. For you, I have no feelings whatsoever. When we're apart, I can be forever happy. Will you let me be?
Yours,
Gloria

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