Evaluation of University-Produced Writing Centers on the Internet

Nazmi Abdul-Salam Al-Masri

nmasri@iugaza.edu.ps

The Islamic University of Gaza

Abstract

Many teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or as a Second Language (ESL) face challenges in teaching academic writing to university students. Some of these challenges are related to writing effective paragraphs, essays, or research papers. One useful way to overcome these difficulties is using university-produced writing centers on the Internet. As these writing centers increase in the number of services and the quality of the contents they offer, this paper attempts to present an evaluative description of the basic differences and similarities among these centers in terms of the contents they provide. The purpose of this review is to find how much useful these writing centers are for developing EFL undergraduates, especially students specialized in English. In the light of this exemplified examination, several suggestions for overcoming some of the weaknesses of these centers will be given.

Background

There is a general agreement among EFL teachers on viewing the writing skill as a highly challenging process and too demanding on teachers, EFL students and native speakers. It requires exposing students to as many examples of effective writing and some samples of unacceptable pieces of writing. One way to do so is by using the handouts or handbooks produced by university writing centers. In recent years there has been a rapid rise in the quality and quantity of American university-developed writing centers on the web. The American-based National Writing Centers Association (NWCA), which is an assembly of the National Council of Teachers of English, has the most up-to-date and comprehensive alphabetized list of writing centers and online writing labs (OWLs). This useful and ever-changing list is maintained by Colgate University and includes over 215 writing centers and labs. This is according to the last revised list on

1 A Refereed Paper presented in the 6th EFL Conference and published in its Proceedings, the American University in Cairo, 2000.
August 30th, 99 and when I last used their site on January 10th, 2000. Examining these writing centers shows the following facts:

- 215 American writing centers and labs
- 150 developed by universities, colleges, community colleges, polytechnics, and schools.
- 165 entitled “writing centers”
- 30 entitled writing “labs”
- 20 entitled writing “workshops, program, place, service

As surveying these numerous centers and labs tends to be an exhaustive and an almost endless process, this study, which is based on a recent nine-month research visit to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, surveyed a sample of several university writing centers focusing mainly on the following randomly-chosen universities:

1. Colgate University Writing Center
2. Purdue University OWL
3. Rensselaer Institute Writing Center
4. The university of Georgia Writing Center
5. The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Writer’s Workshop
6. The University of Richmond Writing Center
7. The University of Texas-Austin Undergraduate Writing Center
8. The University of Wisconsin-Madison Writing Certain

**Why focusing only on university writing centers**

This paper concentrates only on university writing centers or labs for several reasons. First they are too many in number which leads to exposing the writing teachers and the learners to a variety of content, style and structure which will greatly benefit those writers who are familiar with using the Internet. Such variety also gives them the freedom to choose what suits their levels and needs. Another reason is the reliability of these university-developed centers which are developed and maintained by experienced writing specialists. Having free access to benefit from most of these centers represents a third convincing reason for using these centers. Experienced and Internet-familiar
instructors are thus given the opportunity to use and adapt the available materials in ways that meet their students’ needs and level without payment.

Finally, some university writing centers are distinguished from using printed textbooks by giving the Internet users the opportunity to communicate with some writing specialists through email. This is facilitated by many writing centers which ask writers to send their comments, suggestions and questions to a certain email address given at the end of almost every page. Using the computer in this two-way of communication, which is unavailable in the case of printed materials, is likely to increase the learners motivation and enhances his writing ability. In a study conducted on 167 EFL and ESL students in twelve university writing courses in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the USA, Warshauer (1996) found a positive effect on the students motivation for writing and communication in the classroom.

Evaluation of the Purposes of Writing Centers

Below is a list of the purposes as stated by some university writing centers on the web:

1. The University of Maine Writing Center: “is dedicated to helping UM students become better writers.”
2. The University of Minnesota English Department Student Writing Center: “provides writing help for undergraduate students in writing courses.”
3. The University of Washington English Department Writing Center: “is set up … to help students in writing courses.”
4. The university of Texas-Austin Undergraduate Writing Center: “These pages are intended to help writers, students, or otherwise . . .”
5. The University of Georgia Writing center: “can help develop and enhance writing skills for undergraduates as well as for graduates. We also offer assistance for individual projects, ranging from essay through seminar papers to doctoral dissertation.”

An examination of the above sample shows several significant points. First, being based in the USA, most of the writing centers are primarily directed to undergraduate native speakers whether instructors or students. However, some writing centers provide
some materials for EFL students’ needs as will be mentioned later. Second, the level of audience’s writing skill is not always clearly specified. For example, the purposes quoted above are stated in general terms and rarely in specific terms as in the case of Georgia University which mentions essays, seminar papers, and doctoral dissertation. This classification helps the instructor to go to what he is looking for without spending too much time. Finally, almost all surveyed writing centers use one of the following terms: help or assistance, which means that their role is to develop and enhance the already acquired writing skills. It also means that they provide some general strategies and guidelines that will lead the students to success.

**Evaluation of Contents**

Different writing centers offer several valuable services on the web. Among these services are handouts and handbooks on writing and grammar, links to various beneficial sites, tutoring by email, consultations, etc. Taking the ESL students’ needs into consideration as a priority, I will concentrate on examining the usefulness of handouts, handbooks in terms of quantity, quality, updating and the inclusion of relevant links.

**Handout difference in number**

Looking at the directories of several writing centers has shown that the number of the handouts offered by these centers differ greatly. Some may not provide handouts or handbooks but they use e-mail for tutoring as Dakota State University OWL (Online Writing Lab). A few other centers offer too many useful handouts. An excellent example is Purdue University OWL which offers an extensive systematic collection of highly valuable collection of handouts that exceeds 130. Indexed by topics, these handouts cover a vast number of immensely valuable aspects of writing from planning and writing through revising and proofreading to writing across the curriculum as a quick look at Appendix I shows. Between these two extremes comes a third group of writing centers which offers some handouts indexed by topics or alphabets as the writing Center at the University of Richmond and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (18 handouts).
Some other writing centers compiled their handouts into useful handbooks. A good example of handbooks is the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Writer’s Workshop (UIUCWW) and the University of Wisconsin Madison’s Writing Center. Appendix II summarizes the main topics found in the Writing Techniques Handbook at University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign the Writers’ Workshop. This handbook offers advice on various elements of the writing process.

**Handout difference in contents**

The difference between these centers is not only in the number of the handouts they offer but also in the contents of these handouts. One of the important observations concerning the contents of handouts and handbooks is the focus on constructing sentences and to less extent on writing paragraphs without dealing with essays or research papers in depth. A minority of WC offers useful guidelines for academic writing covering essays, and research papers. Purdue University OWL is one of the few exceptions in terms of comprehensiveness of the materials it shows on the web. Looking again at Appendix I shows that Purdue University OWL begins by constructing sentences and then moves to writing paragraphs, essays, research papers and finally professional writing (all are underlined). This is rarely found in other writing centers. Another significant aspect related to handouts contents is the inclusion of certain aspects related to writing followed by examples, and in very few cases followed by exercises, and answer keys. Appendix III exemplifies the function of writing a thesis for a literature paper as offered by the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign Writer’s Workshop.

Many centers tend to concentrate mainly on style and grammar, punctuation and mechanics. This is probably due to viewing accuracy as the most important element in the writing process. Few other centers focus on the developing the writing skills as a recursive process which begins by brainstorming, planning, drafting, revising, and proofreading. Again, the handbooks and the handouts provided by both UIUCWW and Purdue University OWL are excellent examples. A third category directs its major efforts towards specific types (genres) of writing and offer handouts on writing across the curriculum. For example, the University of Victoria Writing Guide gives advice on
writing lab reports. The University of Wisconsin-Madison Writing Center, Purdue University OWL and UIUC Writer’s Workshop also offer useful tips for writing literature papers. Appendix IV is a clear example taken from Purdue University OWL. It shows how a research paper can be written in carefully planned steps. The University of Wisconsin-Madison Writing Center also presents useful handouts that include tips and guidelines on academic writing which cover literature, science research papers, reports, dissertations, and reports.

It has also been observed that although many writing centers present common writing topics (e.g. conciseness, coherence, sexist language, revising, documentation, etc.), they present these topics differently in terms of type and number of examples. This variety is useful for both EFL instructors and students. It exposes both of them to a variety of definitions, explanation and exemplification of certain terms (e.g. dangling modifiers parallel structure). It also gives them the freedom to choose something appropriate to their needs.

**Updating the handouts contents**

An additional point to be considered when the content of handouts is evaluated is the frequency of updating or revising the handouts. Again, updating or revising the handouts and handbooks is a common feature of almost all writing centers. They may, however, differ in the range of the period which could be longer than a year in.

**Offering relevant links**

Although many writing centers directories provide relevant links to other useful writing sites, including writing centers, professional organizations, online journals and in few cases print resources; they differ in the number of links offered and the way they are presented. Some writing centers have many specialized links and sometimes with useful annotations. Including annotations saves writers a great deal of time searching for information. These annotations give hints on the services certain centers offer. For instance, UIUCWW compiles an annotated list of the best web sites for writers. This fairly detailed, incomprehensive list is classified into four types of classified resources.
An important point related to links is the extent of the availability of links to writing resources dedicated to ESL students. This service is not common in all centers. Those centers that provide this service may differ in the number of the links they include on their web page. Again, UIUCWW provides an annotated list of sites for ESL teachers and students.

**Challenges and Suggestions**

Searching the Internet and finding specific information on writing requires spending significant deal of time which many writing instructors and students may lack. The key question to be asked in this context is to what extent are these centers indeed worth paying such valuable time. The answer to this question may not be easy. Yet, I would give a positive answer on the condition of taking into consideration the students’ computer experience, linguistic competence, and their specific needs.

Although most writing centers are dedicated for native students, they can also be beneficial to ESL students. However, more writing resources should be produced and directed to ESL students in accordance with their level. More resources are also needed for students studying English. Providing handouts with more exercises and key answers is considered a necessity to improve their writing skills.

More focus should be laid on emphasizing the importance of viewing writing skill as a challenging, cognitive process that demands high level of thinking to generate, organize and support idea. Furthermore, it should be emphasized that writing successfully requires high level of patience and perseverance. This supporting psychological factor should be highlighted as a few writers centers have labeled under “Overcoming Writer’s Block”.

Finally, coming to what was mentioned at the beginning of this paper about the importance of practice, using NWCA home page is highly recommended to begin with. To save much time and to make the search of relevant information quicker and more effective, the writer is advised to look at NWCA web site. This site compiles an extensive index of the writing centers providing online handouts. This 17- general category list is
organized by the most common and useful subject area in a way that covers almost all aspects of writing. This Colgate University-maintained list is shown in Appendix V.

Conclusion
A paper of this length cannot completely cover the many writing aspects related to the services offered by the many university writing centers available on the web. What needed further is more practical studies based on real classroom teaching. As producing such numerous writing centers is a recent step towards improving the process of writing, teachers and students are encouraged to participate in developing the contents and structure of the learning-teaching materials provided by these centers. Because almost all writing centers welcome comments and suggestions, writing teachers and students can contact these centers to give practical suggestions, comments and systematic reports as a useful feedback for improving these services. Taking into consideration the purposes of the writing programs and the level and needs of the students, this interaction and cooperation will lead to producing more efficient materials in shorter time for the benefit of many multi-lingual and multi-cultural EFL students. It is hoped that this paper can serve as an academic invitation for more practical research directed toward enhancing the writing services presented on the web.
References


Appendix I: Purdue University OWL Handouts Indexed by Topic (1999)

Writing (Planning/Writing/Revising/Genres)
1. Planning/Starting to Write
   - Starting to Write (103)
   - Planning (Invention) (65)
   - Planning (Invention): When you start to write (66)
   - Planning (Invention): Thought Starters (Asking the Right Question) (101).
2. Effective Writing
   - Adding Emphasis (89)
   - Argument/Persuasion: Logic in Argumentative Writing (123)
   - Coherence (100)
   - Conciseness: Methods of Eliminating Wordiness (127): exercise
   - Coping with Writing Anxiety (61)
   - Developing an Outline (63)
   - Sample Outline (64)
   - Non-Sexist Language (26)
   - Overcoming Writer’s Block (62)
   - Paragraph (118)
   - Paragraph (length consistency) (120)
   - Sentence Variety (113)
   - Some Strategies for Improving Sentence Clarity (116)
   - Transitional Devices (Connecting Words) (29)
   - Using Metaphors in Creative Writing (48)
   - Writing with Computers (124)
3. Revising/Editing/Proofreading
   - Editing and Proofreading Strategies for Revision (96)
   - Higher Order Concerns (HOCs) and Later Order Concerns (LOCs) (111)
   - Proofreading for Commas (117) [See B-1]
   - Proofreading Strategies (32)
   - Proofreading Your Paper (97)
   - Steps in Editing Your Papers (91)
4. Types/Genres of Writing
   - Argument/Persuasion: Logic in Argumentative Writing (123)
   - Writing about Fiction (114)
   - Writing Definitions (107)
   - Writing Description (104)
   - Writing Essay Exams (119)
   - Writing about Literature (132).
5. Research Papers
   - Conducting a Productive Web Search (130)
   - Developing an Outline (63)
   - Evaluating Sources of Information (131)
   - Formatting in Sociology (60)
   - Online Resources for Documenting Electronic Sources (110)
   - Paraphrasing (30): exercise and answer key
- Plagiarism (151)
- Quoting, Paraphrasing, and Summarizing (31)
- Sample Outline (64)
- Searching the World Wide Web (128)
- Using American Psychological Association (APA) Format (34)
- Using Modern Language Association (MLA) Format (33)
- Using Statistics (87)
- Writing Research Papers: A Step-by-Step List (94)
- Writing a Research Paper–Hypertext workshop (132.intro)

6. Punctuation: Sentence Punctuation
   - Apostrophes
   - Commas
   - Hyphens
   - Other punctuation
   - Quotation Marks
   - Capitals

7. Spelling

8. Sentence Construction

9. Sentence Parts, Patterns, and Variety

10. Sentence Errors

11. Sentence Punctuation

12. Clauses and Phrases

13. Dangling Modifiers

14. Parallel Structure

15. Active and Passive Voice in Verbs

16. Parts Of Speech
   - Nouns
   - Pronouns
   - Verbs
   - Adjectives and adverbs
   - Prepositions

17. English As A Second Language (ESL)

18. Exercises (And Answer Keys)

19. Professional Writing
Appendix II: Writing Techniques Handbook (UIUCWW)

1. General Techniques
2. Audience: Some General Advice
3. Body Paragraphs
4. Developing a Thesis Statement
5. Five Editing Principles
6. Parallelism
7. Practical Writing Advice
8. Transitions and Connective Phrases
9. Using Commas Correctly
10. Writing Summaries
11. Overcoming Writer's Block
12. Handling Quotations
13. Genre-Specific Techniques
14. Tips on Taking an Essay Exam
15. Writing About Film
16. Writing Abstracts
17. Writing About Poetry
18. Writing Cover Letters
19. Writing a Literature Paper
20. Writing a Thesis for a Literature Paper
21. Writing a Philosophy Paper
22. Writing Personal Statements
23. Writing Resumes
24. Writing Proposals
25. Writing Standardized Essay Exams
Appendix III: Writing Techniques Handbook
(University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign Writer’s Workshop)

Writing a Thesis for a Literature Paper

In general

1. Your thesis should provide a focus for your essay. That is, it should narrow the field of your discussion from a broad topic to a specific line of reasoning/argumentation within that topic area.
2. Your thesis should be limited to what can be accomplished in the specified number of pages.
3. It should announce the general topic as well as offer an argument/analysis which the essay will support and develop.
4. You should provide a thesis early in your essay in order to establish your position and give your reader a sense of direction.

Sample theses

1. Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Miller's Tale* is a bawdy story of adultery and revenge.

   This thesis offers no real focus for the essay nor does it suggest a line of argument. It suggests the essay will be a summary of the plot.

2. Characters in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Miller's Tale* subvert certain audience expectations.

   This thesis does suggest an argument/analysis, but it could be more specific; "certain audience expectations" is broad and vague.

3. In Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Miller's Tale*, the characters of Alisoun, Nicholas, and Absolon subvert audience expectations raised by the courtly love tradition illustrated by *The Knight's Tale*.

   Here, there is a specific focus as well as an explicit line of argument/analysis.
Appendix IV: Writing Research Papers: A Step-by-Step Procedure
(Purdue University OWL)

The Preliminaries
1. Choose a topic
2. Begin preliminary reading
3. Restrict the subject
4. Develop a preliminary thesis statement
5. Gathering Data
6. Compile the working bibliography
7. Prepare the bibliography on cards in correct form (3" x 5" cards)
   - begin extensive work in the library reference room; be sure to check:
     - general bibliographies
     - trade bibliographies
     - indexes (books and collections, literature in periodicals, newspaper indexes, pamphlet indexes)
     - library electronic catalogue

Taking Notes
1. Develop a preliminary outline
2. Evaluate your source material; which is primary material and which is secondary material?
3. Begin note-taking on cards (4" x 6" cards)
4. Avoid plagiarism

Writing the Paper
1. Develop the final outline; test your outline
2. Prepare to write:
   a. put your note cards in the order that your outline is in
   b. consider your (real and imagined) readers and how their expectations may affect your tone and style
3. Write the rough draft
4. Check your documentation carefully
5. Revise and rewrite
6. Check the format of the text, citations, notes, and bibliography (most instructors recommend MLA or APA format)
7. Proofread
Appendix V: Indexed Sites of Writing Center Handouts
(Colgate University Writing Center)

THE WRITING PROCESS

1. GETTING STARTED
   - Colgate University
   - University of Hawaii Online Learning Assistance (HOLA)
   - Princeton University
   - Texas A & M
   - University of Texas
   - University of Washington-Tacoma
   - University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill

2. ORGANIZING AND DEVELOPING YOUR IDEAS
   - Chesapeake College
   - Colgate University
   - Northwestern University
   - Pike's Peak Community
   - Princeton University
   - Texas A & M
   - Texas Tech University
   - University of Delaware
   - University of South Carolina-Aiken
   - Washburn University
   - RPI (Rensseler Polytechnic Institute)
   - University of Toronto
   - San Jose State
   - University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill

3. REVISING YOUR PAPER
   - University of Hawaii (HOLA)
   - Longwood College
   - Princeton University
   - Texas A & M
   - Trinity College
   - University of Texas
   - University of Washington-Tacoma
   - RPI
   - University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill

4. GRAMMAR AND PUNCTUATION
   - Longwood College
   - Temple University
   - University of Texas
   - University of Washington-Tacoma
   - Chesapeake College
   - Colgate University
   - Texas Tech
- University of Delaware
- University of South Carolina-Aiken
- Biola University
- Harper College
- RPI
- University of Toronto
- University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill

5. DOCUMENTING SOURCES
- University of Hawaii (HOLA
- Princeton University
- Trinity College
- University of Texas
- Gallaudet University
- University of South Carolina-ECE (IEEE guidelines for Engineers)
- Taft Community College
- University of Georgia
- University of Toronto
- University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill
- University of Madison-Wisconsin (excellent handout on Chicago Style).

6. COVER LETTERS, RESUMES, AND PERSONAL ESSAYS FOR GRADUATE SCHOOL
1. Colgate University
2. RPI
3. University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill

7. SPECIFIC TOPICS IN WRITING
8. WRITING ABOUT LITERATURE
- Texas A & M
- University of Texas

9. WRITING AN ABSTRACT
- USC-ECE
- RPI

10. RHETORICAL MODES OF DISCOURSE
- Taft Community College

11. SAMPLE ESSAYS
- From Taft College:
  - One Paragraph
  - Three Paragraph
  - Five Paragraph
  - Longer College-Level Essay
  - Diablo Valley College Comp 122

12. PLAGIARISM
- University of Delaware
- University of Toronto

13. LAB REPORTS
- Longwood College
- Illinois Institute of Technology
14. ESSAY EXAMS
   - Colgate University
   - Washburn University
15. ESL
   - University of Washington-Tacoma
   - RPI
16. BUSINESS AND TECHNICAL WRITING
17. UNDERSTANDING ASSIGNMENTS
   - Chesapeake College
18. THE RESEARCH PAPER
   - University of Hawaii-HOLA
   - Chesapeake College
   - University of Georgia
   - University of Toronto
   - University of North Carolina- Chapel Hill
19. NON-SEXIST LANGUAGE
   - University of Texas
   - RPI
   - University of North Carolina- Chapel Hill

Prepared by Lisa Schwartz, Colgate University Writing Center revised: July 26, 1999.
Academic Writing. The University of Wisconsin-Madison Writing Center.)