

How to Start a University Writing Centre

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(Lotte sent this version by email to Baldur Sigurðsson in 2009)

Below follow suggestions and advice from the Academic Writing Centre of Copenhagen University, Humanities Department, building on the experiences of a number of the first European writing centres. This writing centre was founded in 1992 at the initiative of its first two writing consultants: Lotte Rienecker who now directs the centre, and Christian Kock, now a professor of rhetorics.

Individual Initiatives

It is unlikely that higher education deans and provosts of their own accord will take the initiative to open a writing centre and that one day, you will find vacant positions advertised for you to fill! Most European writing centres are founded at the initiative of individuals who have a vision of what “their” institution needs which it may not even be aware of.

Arguments Pro Writing Centres

Arguments that might cause a higher education institution to sponsor a writing centre:

- Retention and graduation rates
- Improving the general standard of academic writing for the benefit of those who need to graduate and to publish: Graduate students, PhD students, and young researchers
- Service to staff: Staff courses and co-teaching, collecting information about writing tasks, writing criteria, feedback, both locally and internationally,
- The development of written instructional materials for academic writing and for teaching academic writing: Textbooks, leaflets, handouts, on-line handouts and tutorials, CD-ROMs
- Academic Writing courses in English - for foreign and/or national students and researchers wanting to publish internationally
- Image and alibi!

Many writing centres have started out as temporary facilities, made permanent only after years of proving their worth.

Allies

Administrators and students’ organisations are your most natural allies in starting up a writing centre. If you can summon the support of important professors, it might greatly advance your case, but expect teaching staff to be reluctant, their argument being that they are already doing everything a writing centre proposes to do. You’ll need “friends in high places.” (The experience is, however, that once established, writing centres and their staff

are overwhelmed with requests for all sorts of writing and study skills courses, lectures, tutorials, counselling and requests for supervision, also by other higher education institutions who do not have a writing centre of their own.)

Activities

Activities of a writing centre may be:

- Courses and workshops, in or across the disciplines, with or without discipline teachers
- Written materials on academic writing from hand-outs to textbooks
- Tutorials
- Online Writing Lab (OWL), and/or online tutoring
- Teachers' courses, consultations and written materials on i.e. writing intensive courses, setting writing tasks, conferencing with students, giving feedback, evaluating and grading writing and on text formats, structures, templates and language advice
- Networking and building up a knowledge base with other writing programs and centers nationally and internationally.

Many writing centers expand their focus on academic writing to broader study skills such as reading, note-taking, oral presentation, critical thinking and argumentation courses, and you may want to cooperate with the library on literature search courses integrated with writing tasks. Reading and oral presentation courses are often in great demand. Some writing centers also offer courses on genres of writing of relevance to later employment, such as article writing, business writing, literary essay writing etc.

What you decide to offer should rest on what skills, competences, staffing and technical possibilities you have, as well as on the most pressing needs of your institution.

Staffing

Try to go for a staffing of at least two academics and a full time student assistant/secretary, even at the outset. One- person writing-centres are liable to wear that one person down; you will need at least one sparring partner. University writing centre staff is generally educated in any language discipline, pedagogy, psychology or philosophy. A staff with a diversity of educational backgrounds is a strength, and might give a broader access to the disciplines in the institution. Linguistic competence – whether from formal education or just “a natural talent” is crucial to have represented in the writing centre staff, for many tasks and many requests from students require high linguistic competence down to the word and sign level. The staff should be competent writers themselves!

A student assistant is absolutely necessary to help with advertisement, taking calls and sign-ups for courses and tutorials, office upkeep and accountancy, web page upkeep etc. You will be surprised at the amount of secretarial work a writing centre requires. You or your assistant(s) will probably need to be quite computer literate, so this is an important qualification. We have found student assistants preferable to trained secretaries – students can more easily tune into and “translate” the needs of the users.

Administrative or Research Staff?

In the best possible world, some research staff, for instance PhD students writing about (teaching) academic writing would be associated with a writing centre. In reality, many writing centres are staffed by lecturers not currently doing research, or by academics belonging to the administrative staff. You will need to think through the consequences of working as a researcher, respectively in an administrative position in the writing centre. Our overall concern would be that you should not long term accept a post connected with low pay and low prestige. This will work against your authority with students and staff alike, and undercut your very functions as an instructor in academic writing. This is a point where one might set short term and long term goals.

Employing Student Tutors

Some centres employ a number of student tutors. This is the norm in the US, more rarely seen in Europe. It requires a large number of tutorials, thorough training of tutors, means of paying or otherwise rewarding tutors, and tasks that student tutors can handle. Tutors are a possibility especially in institutions where much writing occurs early in the curriculum, and the writing is not deeply tied to specialised research skills. If your writing centre caters for PhD students and graduate thesis writers only, student tutors is probably not your first choice for staffing. Whether tutors is a viable option for you depends on your local higher education system and its immediate needs.

Budget

You will need a budget of your own, even if modest. You need a budget for office materials, photocopies, (paper is a big item on our budget), literature on academic writing for a students library, computers, if possible for the occasional hiring of a guest lecturer, and for visiting conferences if at all possible. Having to ask or apply for every cent will wear your patience thin.

Office Requirements

If you are going to offer tutorials, you will need individual offices for each writing consultant, a front office, and a possibly a room sufficiently big for small groups to meet + photocopying facilities nearby. Some argue that the writing centre is best placed near the library, signalling study functions. Centrality could make all the difference.

Affiliation with the Disciplines

A writing centre gets the best conditions if it is, and is seen as independent of any one discipline, but cooperating with the disciplines. Many writing centres are placed under the mother tongue discipline, and for many this has led to problems with borderline delineation of the staffing of both. Try to argue for a separate function referring directly to the deans office. If you need to be affiliated with other units, the better choices are Teaching and Learning Labs, the library or the student counselling service.

Evaluation of Teaching and Tutorials

Positive evaluations will help towards making a new facility permanent, so every opportunity to collect questionnaires and to sum up the results should be used, as well as having people in power sit in on your activities. Evaluation of teaching and tutoring is tricky and there are no tried-and-true methods. Questionnaires sent out to students 3 months after a tutorial with stamped return envelopes, or sent as e-mails, are not liable to give return rates much over 30%, and questionnaires after a teaching session may give a 100% return, but show little more than the performance value of your teaching. Even so, many teachers and administrators ask for evaluations as proof of the “efficacy” of any new facility, and my advise would be at least always to keep track of every activity and be able to account for who benefits and how from your activities.

It is strategic to use teaching staff as resources, by inviting teachers to lecture or sit on panels on aspects of academic writing on which they are the experts. Important to the disciplines is whether your writing centre can be used directly by staff in local activities. Working in the disciplines builds liaisons, and any successes with activities in the disciplines are likely to at some point be reported back to those in charge of finances.

It is a good idea to take the initiative to send an interim report to your dean’s office after a couple of semesters of functioning.

Literature on writing centres:

Barnett, Robbert W. and Blumner, Jacob S. (eds. 1999): *Writing Centers and Writing Across the Curriculum Programs: Building Interdisciplinary Partnership*. Greenwood, Westport.

Björk, Lennart; Bräuer, Gerd; Rienecker Lotte and Jørgensen, Peter Stray: *Teaching Academic Writing in European Higher Education*. Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht.

Mullin, Joan A. and Wallace, Ray (eds. 1994): *Intersections: Theory-Practice in the Writing Center*. NCTE, Urbana.

Murphy, Christina and Law, Joe (eds. 1995): *Landmark Essays on Writing Centers*. Hermagoras, Davies.

Myers-Breslin, Linda (ed.1999): *Administrative Problem-Solving for Writing Programs and Writing Centers: Scenarios in Effective Program Management*. NCTE, Urbana.

Listserves for writing center staff and teachers/researchers of teaching academic writing:

- Europe (International) Eataw: subscribe at www.hum.ku.dk/eataw
- UK Writing-dev-he: subscribe at www.jiscmail.ac.uk/lists/LDHEN.html
- US wcenter: subscribe at <http://iwca.syr.edu/IWCA/Email.html> (or send this one-line message subscribe wcenter <your first name your last name> to listproc@listserv.ttu.edu).