

Center for TEACHING & LEARNING

Writing Center Newsletter

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Center for Teaching & Learning Staff Showcase Best Practices

By **Meg Mikovits**
Professional Tutor

Five professional staff and five peer tutors, members of Cabrini College's Center for Teaching & Learning (CTL), presented at the College Reading and Learning Association Conference on Friday, March 20, 2009. The conference, held at Bucks County Community College in Newtown, PA, brought together educators, administrators, and students from 20 schools throughout Pennsylvania and New Jersey. The conference theme, "Showcase of Best Practices in Tutoring: Reading, Writing & Math," provided a forum to discuss strategies and techniques for tutoring and advising college students.

The CTL presented two sessions at the conference. Diane Devanney, Math Specialist, and Jacquie Lavelly, Professional Math Tutor, of the Math Resource Center (MRC) offered a presentation titled "A Winning Trio: How Faculty, A Math Resource Center and Peer Tutors Worked Together to Implement a Math Homework Lab." Peer tutors Gina Mulranen '10 and Chelsie Eyerl '11 also presented at this session. The focus of the session was building a collaborative model linking faculty with professional and peer tutors in the creation of the MRC's new supplemental instruction offering for middle track math classes: The Math Homework Lab.

The CTL's second session at the conference, offered by Writing Cen-

ter staff members, was titled "Feng-Shui for Writing Tutors: Mentoring as a Re-Arrangement of Pedagogical 'Space.'" Tracie Kennedy, Coordinator of the Writing Center; Maria Cipollone, Writing Specialist; and Meg Mikovits, Professional Writing Tutor, presented along with peer tutors Jess Gruber '10, Janie Chieco '09, and Shannon Fandler '10. This presentation examined the relationship between physical space and professional tutor, peer tutor, and student interactions in the Writing Center. Audience members participated in exercises to design and create more dynamic environments in their own tutoring and advising spaces.

Confessions of a Dash-a-holic

By **Tracie Kennedy**
Writing Center Coordinator

They say admitting the problem is the first step, so I'm going to do this publicly—darn it (and in writing no less)—and maybe then I'll face up to it once and for all.

I need help.

OK, let's be honest. Life is hard, and over time we all develop any manner of coping mechanisms—some evolve so slowly that maybe we don't even notice until they've taken on a life of their own or prove to be problematic for those around us. I had such a come-uppance at the editing meeting of the last newsletter, so with this issue I am coming clean.

Hi, my name is Tracie, and I'm a dash-a-holic.

No, not the spice—the punctuation mark. And yes, I blame the instant message culture, where we are asked to compose thoughts so quickly we don't give time or consideration to the type of pause that is appropriate—because who notices?—and—let's face it—the dash is such a versatile little critter it fits as a semicolon (juncture between complete thoughts, as demonstrated in the third paragraph above), a colon (announcing elaboration of previous point, as in paragraph seven), and a comma (insertion of a parenthetical comment, as in the first paragraph). And I'll also blame my literary idol, J.D. Salinger, who is quite the fan of the rather lengthy parenthetical comment, especially in his novella *Seymour: An Introduction*, which I happen to be reading now—for maybe the twentieth time.

But yes—I add red-faced and hum-

bled—I'm not going to get anywhere blaming anything or anyone else. *The problem is mine.*

It's gotten so bad my supervisor actually called a meeting with me to share her concern. Now that's some serious caring—a *punctuation intervention*. That was when the light went on. I noticed how I stack the books in my office horizontally because I like how they look that way, how sometimes I come by the Dixon Center parking lot early in the morning while it's still mostly empty—just to gaze lovingly at those concrete partitions lined up so nicely, side by side. In fact, when I'm driving I have to concentrate very hard (not unlike my beloved Seymour, as those of you who've read "A Perfect Day for Bananafish"—which of course you should, immediately—will know) not to get distracted by the white lines dividing the lanes, which—especially when I am driving fast enough to make them appear to come at me with some speed—look rather like a long train of dashes calling me to follow them. And then I start imagining where might a stream of compelling dashes lead me to? Well, then before you know it I have headlights staring me down and I'm jolted out of my reverie by the loud blaring of a very annoyed car horn. And rightfully so!

Look, I didn't choose this. I'm not proud of it. That's why I'm coming clean—here and now—and inviting all of you to keep me on the path of varied sentence structures and punctuation use. There are a lot of terrific marks of punctuation out there, and a lot of interesting sentences that I know I have the ability to build with them—One Step at a Time.

A Slumdog Review

By **Jessica Gruber '10**
Writing Tutor
English Major

As a result of all the awards *Slumdog Millionaire* recently received (8 Academy Awards, 5 Critics' Choice Awards, 4 Golden Globes, all including Best Picture) as well as raves from friends, I decided to find out if the film really is as good as everyone claims. I also wanted to try a new critical approach after having taken two semesters of film history classes at Cabrini with Dr. Andrew Douglas, adjunct faculty member and Director of Education at the Bryn Mawr Film Institute (www.brynmawrfilm.org). In the film, I encountered an intricately crafted account of Jamal, a poor boy forced to endure horrible living conditions in the slums of Mumbai, India. He and his brother witness atrocities, suffer from poverty, and are orphaned at young ages. As the two try to make their way through such chaos, Jamal's one hope is another orphan, a young girl named Latika, with whom he is destined to fall in love. Jamal gains fame and fortune on the Indian TV show, *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* His response to each question is extracted from his informal education in the slums of Mumbai.

Slumdog Millionaire incorporates a classic love story within the plot; the cinematic version of this saga (a boy who falls in love with a girl and chases after her) was first presented on film in the United States during the late 1920s. In the film classes I've taken, Dr. Douglas identifies this formal element as the "Classic Hollywood Era" approach. The film also invites conventional aspects of Indian cinema (as shown in the dance scene during the credit reel). This blend of the conventional and predictable plotlines with the innovative cinematic techniques makes *Slumdog Millionaire* a truly compelling film.

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"Life can't really defeat a writer who is in love with writing, for life itself is a writer's lover until death—fascinating, cruel, lavish, warm, cold, treacherous, constant." —Edna Ferber

Close Encounters of the Retail Kind: A Short Story

By Shannon Fandler '10
Writing Tutor
English Major

Late one night a few months ago, I turned on a TV documentary about paranormal activity just in time to hear the statistic that 5 out of every 1,000 people believe they have been abducted by aliens. I work as a salesclerk in the men's section of a well-known department store. The day after I saw this show, every person who walked past my cash register was suspect: the old guy who keeps rubbing all the polo shirts in hopes of finding one soft enough not to chafe his dry, fragile skin; the young woman with the baby carriage who steals underwear by slipping the package under her baby's sleeping head like a plastic-covered pillow; the old lady who launders her cash and douses it with half a can of air freshener before sending it out to the retailers of the world; the distinguished-looking, well-dressed man who approaches me as I'm straightening a tie table and tells me he thinks I am a reincarnation of his ex-girlfriend, Rita. It isn't a pick-up line. "You're looking great, considering how you died," he says. "How are your six kids doing?" These are the people I think of when I imagine any sort of alien abduction.

But no. According to the documentary, I am wrong. Very, very average people are abducted every day, which is why you never hear about it. At least once every day, I probably come into contact with an abductee. Maybe I only make brief eye contact with one across a crowded street, or I brush up against one in the grocery store. *But still.* I wonder how they are coping with their terrible secret.

A coworker of mine repeatedly brags that his ex-niece saw a UFO hovering over the trash pile in her backyard. It drives me crazy when people drag their ex-nieces, cousins, and daughter-in-law's best friends into the picture just to borrow their stories. I've always been in the habit of simply stealing stories when the occasion warrants it.

For instance, when bragging about my good memory, I have often told people that I remember being born. I remember the pressure on my head as I squeezed through the birth canal. I remember the chill in the hospital air and my sudden inability to breathe. This is pure bull. It was my *grandfather's sister* who remembers being born, but since she will in all likelihood never meet me, because she is dead, I feel that it is perfectly okay to take over her interesting anecdote. She only ever had the one.

Other relatives of mine have committed suicide, received lobotomies, communicated with ghosts, and died in prison. But they were all different people. No single person had more than one really interesting thing happen to him or her. The rest of the time, when they got together, they would talk about collectible knives, uses for baking soda, and the origin of fingerling potatoes. I'm guessing, given my family's history, that I have at least one relative who was abducted by aliens. But you'd never know it to look at the staid sepia-toned portraits in my mother's collection of albums. These people look like they just stepped out of Sunday church, and their upper lips hide their snaggle teeth. They've got class, or at least they faked it for a day. You wonder, if they came across an alien, would they extend their white gloved hands and welcome it to earth? Or, would they grab pitchforks and torches to smoke the monster out?

I have since opened myself up to the possibility that I may one day be abducted by aliens. I imagine myself having a conversation with my captors: "Well, there's not much to say about me," I would say. "I'm pretty average. I know a few people, on the other hand, who would make far more interesting specimens." "No, that's okay," I imagine them answering back through their high-tech alien-to-human translation system, "You'll suit our purposes just fine. *Mwah-ha-ha-ha.*"

I Found It Online: Top Five Warning Signs That You Have Encountered a Questionable Resource for Your Paper

By Maria Cipollone
Writing Specialist

Can you explain why the following aren't scholarly sources?

1. There are flashing advertisements for a pink iPhone and the Acai berry diet (as featured on *Oprah* and *Rachel Ray*) on the site where your source is located.
2. You must agree to a retina scan in order to access the source, which will self-destruct after you finish reading it.
3. The source includes multiple references to the "coextensive subject entry" or the "syndetic structure."
4. The topic of the paper is the name of the website (e.g., www.ineedtoresearchthecivilwar.com).
5. The source's picture has been tagged in your Facebook pictures as "The One with the Research Papers for Sale."

How did you do? Check your answers at the bottom of the page.

Blurring the Lines of Opposition: Welcoming the Creative Elements of Academic Writing

By Shannon Winters '10
Writing Tutor
English & Secondary Education
Major

While growing up in New York, I noticed children were always grouped into categories: boy or girl, tomboy or girly, popular or geeky. Being forced into these categories had a profound impact on me—I disliked the experience immensely. My neighbor Joey wouldn't let me play a ball game with him and the other boys on the street because he said my mom would yell at him when I came home with scraped elbows and knees. I remember fighting daily with him about his seemingly simple reality that I refused to accept. Several girls in my class also had a similar desire to sort out our classmates and would often talk about who was a tomboy and who was girly. Although I protested that I could rough around with the boys, they insisted I was girly because I always wore dresses to school. During middle and high school, the categories multiplied: sports or drama, gothic or hip-hop, math club or literary magazine. My frustration grew, but I defied these boundaries by participating in the activities that suited my interests, despite my fellow classmates' desires to categorize me into an "either/or" classification. I understand their desire to put people in their respective boxes; for some, labeling provides a sense of order and control in an otherwise chaotic existence.

Now as a college student, I'm still just as resistant to the classification of writing styles into academic and creative, in the same way I resisted such divisions in my younger years. At this point, I've matured into an understanding that resistance to labeling doesn't simply mean celebrating differences between the genres of writing (which tends to strengthen those "brand" names),

but rather by approaching all pieces with a respect for structure and intention that highlights the commonalities between them. For example, I tend to be as meticulous about my creative work as I am about my academic work. In both cases, I pay attention to the placement of every comma, work and rework every sentence until it is nearly perfect (although according to my standards, it never will be), and obsess over the details that I know are in my head but for one reason or another don't translate to the page. Also, creative pieces require the same attention to format that a laboratory report for chemistry requires. While audiences might expect interesting departures from convention in an artistic piece, they too need a comfortable arrangement in order to appreciate creativity.

In my role as tutor, I like to remind tutees that any piece of writing has multiple levels and one genre does not exclude any element, whether it is structure, form, rhythm, metaphor or even citation. I resist rigid labeling when it comes to student writing—insisting there is no rivalry between academic and creative writing—but that each is mutually inclusive. Additionally, I believe that blurring the lines motivates student writers to engage more fully with the possibilities of composition. I counter the same labeling that tends to limit student writers' imaginations. I find this exercise helps their writing (and subsequent experience in the Writing Center) to become more dynamic and ever-evolving: *their relationship with writing has no boundaries.*

My hope is that I will carry the broadest aspects of this message into my future teaching career: that both girls and boys can be messy, participate in tea parties and ball games, and learn to write successfully both in and out of the classroom.

I Found It Online Answer Key:

1. 'Comon, now, really?'
2. A retina scan might indicate that you've entered a deeply secretive layer of information, like the X-Files, or that you've stumbled upon something intended for Inspector Gadget's eyes only. *Quick, hit CANCEL!*
3. Sources that contain heavy jargon such as these terms should be used carefully—consult your professor or a librarian to find a source that is more accessible.
4. Websites such as these only skim the surface of the available research on your topic. Any old website will have a personal opinion about the idea of *cold fusion* (or in this case, the U.S. Civil War) but then again, who doesn't have a personal opinion about that? It's best to look for professional work published in an academic setting.
5. If you purchase a term paper, you'll pay more dearly than the monthly fee and interest rate on your credit card.