

Center for TEACHING & LEARNING

Writing Center Newsletter

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WRITINGCENTER@CABRINI.EDU

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Writing Matters: Engagements through the Common Word

By Cassy Pressimone Beckowski
Writing Specialist

Cabrini's Engagement with the Common Good (ECG) courses are rooted in service: they empower students' social justice efforts by exploring the relationship between individuals and their communities. Read a little further in the course description, however, and you'll find that oft-dreaded phrase, "Writing-intensive." Students are asked to write—gulp—three or more papers over the course of a semester. Some might argue that all of this "paper-work" interferes with time that could be better spent serving their communities. On the contrary, writing plays a foundational role in the quest for social justice: it enriches our understanding of society within the context of the classroom, promotes discourse on a global scale, and celebrates the progress of social justice—the action that enables change.

Working in a community gives students the opportunity to cultivate a personal definition of social justice. By discussing these experi-

ences in the ECG classroom, students come to a deeper understanding of their impact. Writing promotes reflection and analysis as bridges between action and acknowledgment—it moves students from the realm of "What" into the realms of "Why" and "How." Furthermore, exploring social justice through writing emphasizes the universality of students' efforts by placing them in global, historical, and diverse other contexts. Writing, speech, and service become the active forces through which social justice is empowered. Taken together, they create a unique map upon which the past, present, and future of social justice can be charted.

This approach to studying social justice takes us back to our communities and allows us to reach them in even larger ways. While speech and service can have profound local impact, it is through writing that speech is disseminated and social justice is inspired on an increasingly global scale. In this techno-

logical age, the rallying cry for social justice is shared through emails, tweets, Facebook causes, magazine articles, newscasts, petitions, screenplays—the list continues, the languages change, but the power of the written word remains the same.

Cabrini has joined a long tradition by emphasizing writing as an integral component in the promotion of social justice. The search for social justice can be traced historically through writings from all ages and cultures, from Plato's *Republic* to the United States Constitution to Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech and beyond. Momentous actions can change lives and redefine society; monumental speeches can invoke the power of those actions within a cultural moment. Written accounts allow the great achievements of the past to resonate, shaping the emerging ideas of the present. When it comes to keeping the hope and progress of social justice alive, writing matters.

Top Ten Films about Writing (and a few that didn't make the cut)

By Tracie Kennedy
Writing Center Coordinator

First of all, I am not a student of film. I am a fan of films and a fan of writing, so please accept this list as a very personal commentary on how my two favorite genres are best blended. Second, rather than providing a full synopsis—which you can easily find on the Internet Movie Database, Netflix and elsewhere—I'm simply offering some brief commentary on each film, particularly what I think each illuminates about writing that makes it worthy of recommendation.

10. *Finding Forrester* I saw this movie years ago, but I remember it as one of the better (and there are many bad ones) of the reclusive-writer-coaxed-out-of-hiding genre. I also recall being inspired by the message that mastery of language can be a way to build connections and transcend boundaries.

9. *Freedom Writers* I have some major reservations about this film, but I love the core message it conveys: Everyone, no matter the circumstances, has a story to tell. (You do too; find it!)

8. *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* First of all, I love Tyler Perry movies. More specific to writing, however, this film speaks to journaling as a way both to keep and to share secrets.

When we are unable to speak our truth, journaling can be a way to work out problems privately, a source of empowerment, maybe even a form of prayer.

7. *Barton Fink* Probably the most effective representation of writer's block ever captured on film. It also includes a sparkling (and somewhat heart-wrenching) performance by John Mahoney as W.P. Mayhew, a Faulkneresque writer who has succumbed to the perils of commercial success.

6./5. *Stranger Than Fiction/In the Mouth of Madness* (tie) Two different sides (one horror, one comedy) of the "I'm living the story" genre. *Madness* suffers from some poor acting and hokey special effects, but the idea of a blurring between fiction and reality is presented at times with startling results. *Stranger* is, of course, much lighter: Reclusive IRS agent Harold Crick wakes one morning to find himself quite literally the subject of a novel. Convincing others this is happening is nearly impossible for Crick. The author herself is stunned at the revelation—and must re-think her entire novel as a result. This film also provides another very convincing portrayal of writer's

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We are proud to showcase the work of some of our senior tutors in this edition of the newsletter!

To read previous issues and to learn more about the Writing Center's resources, visit our website:
www.cabrini.edu/writingcenter

The Grad is a Lonely Job Hunter

By Jessica Gruber '10
Writing Tutor

It's 11:30 at night and my friend yells across at the hall, "Can you help me with my résumé?" I have other homework, but I jokingly reply, "Sure. Let's work on our résumés so we can get jobs and afford an apartment together next fall." We spend the next hour updating and streamlining our résumés and cover letters in the hopes of landing that elusive job. It may seem overwhelming at first, but preparing a résumé and cover letter doesn't have to be scary. Selling yourself to a potential employer is just one more way to put your writing skills to work.

Cover Letter Composing 101:

Target your cover letter to fit what your potential employers are looking for; in other words, ask yourself, why are you the ideal candidate?

Identify key words or skills mentioned in the job ad, and tailor your cover letter to show the ways in which you fit most or all of these qualifications. Your po-

tential bosses may have five or 500 résumés to look through, so make it as easy as possible for them to see why they should call you for an interview.

Focus on the employers' needs and how you would fit in. Be specific!

Don't forget—if you're mailing your cover letter, sign it.

Be assertive about why you're a great candidate, but don't be arrogant because that will turn many employers off.

Think of your cover letter as a chance to connect with your potential employers. Your letters should sound professional, yet they should also convey a sense of your personality.

Include one or two specific examples of accomplishments or experiences that prove you have exactly what it takes to succeed in the job. Don't go overboard.

Limit the length to about a page, or 3-5 paragraphs.

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Upholding Academic Honesty in the 21st Century

By Shannon Winters '10
Writing Tutor

Three years ago when I applied to be a student member of Cabrini's Academic Honesty Board, I had a limited understanding of what academic integrity, plagiarism, or intellectual theft was. Now, having heard over a dozen cases and having cultivated a very strong attitude against academic dishonesty, I can say that this issue must be addressed with greater urgency on college campuses. Many argue that the advent of the internet has opened up classrooms to the possibility of cheating and plagiarism in student-submitted work and are quick to dismiss the problem as technological. I am more inclined to believe, however, that the internet is a powerful resource through which we can educate students about the importance of academic honesty.

In preparing this article, some of the statistics I found relating to plagiarism astounded me. A 2003 survey of 4,500 U.S. high school students conducted by the Center for Academic Integrity reveals 74% admitted to cheating on a major test, 72% admitted to cheating on a written assignment, and 52% admitted they had used the internet to plagiarize written assignments. The only discovery that shocked me more than the revealing nature of these numbers was the fact that there are over 250 plagiarism sites on the internet. Peggy Bates and Margaret Fain, employees at Coastal Carolina University's Kimbel Library, have compiled a page listing all the websites that facilitate and promote plagiarism, and this list is updated every six months.

While most plagiarism conversations center on "academic"

honesty, ownership extends to creative writing as well. I will never forget the day I sat in my high school senior year creative writing class and listened to my teacher read another student's work which had, verbatim, several paragraphs taken from an entry I had written in my *LiveJournal* several weeks prior. At first, I thought to myself how strange it was that I felt like I had heard those words before. It was when I started reciting the words in my head in tandem with the teacher that I recalled that those were *my* words. To this day, I do not know who plagiarized my online blog (or who would want to, for that matter) but my teacher assured me after class that he would deal with the student in question. Since then, I have removed myself from any blogging sites or pages such as *FanFiction* or *FictionPress*. The anxiety caused four years ago by something that seemed so insignificant to an outsider has made a tremendous impact on how I view my own writing and assess it for possible plagiarism.

I do believe the internet has played a major role in bringing plagiarism to the forefront, but that doesn't mean cheating has become more prevalent as a result. In fact, years ago it might have been easier to plagiarize because it seemed less likely that a teacher would go back to a plethora of books or encyclopedias to check for errors. Today, with the click of a mouse, teachers can instantly see what belongs to the student and what doesn't. Perhaps by shifting focus from students' products to their processes, we can help to cultivate in them a deeper, more personal understanding of academic honesty.

The Grad is a Lonely Job Hunter

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Résumé Building 101:

Make, as a starting point, a chronological list of all of the activities, clubs and honor societies you have been participating in since you began college.

Devise an appropriate, professional email address. While beerpongchamp09@aol.com may be funny to you, it won't go over well with potential bosses. Consider using your name or your initials.

Update all of your contact information, so that you can be reached at any of the phone numbers or addresses you provide.

Detail your accomplishments by using action verbs. "Collected and collated company data" packs more punch

than "I was responsible for handling data."

Prioritize your achievements. List experiences in reverse chronological order. Potential employers want to see what you were responsible for last month, more so than last year.

Simplify your résumé so that it is easy to read. Divide it into sections (Job Experience, Volunteer Work, Undergraduate Research, etc.), and bullet the items.

Proofread and spell check!

Don't lie or stretch the truth. If you land the job, you will be responsible for all the tasks you say you know how to do.

Highlight the important skills you learned as a result of volunteer work as well as paid work (e.g., leadership skills). Be specific about how non-paid work experience is relevant.

Limit the length to 1-2 pages.

Top Ten Films about Writing

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block as well as a hilarious look at the public and private work of writing.

4. *Secret Window* Who wouldn't want to watch Johnny Depp in anything? In addition, this is a seriously suspenseful film—with a powerful warning on the very real dangers of plagiarism!

3. *Possession* Based on the acclaimed novel by A.S. Byatt, this film tells the story of two literary experts (played by Gwyneth Paltrow and Aaron Eckhart) who uncover a secret relationship between two Victorian poets through the discovery of hidden letters. If you can get past the bad acting, there actually is a lovely story here. I was deeply moved by two central ideas: one, the feeling that we actually know personally an author whose work we love; and two, the unique intimacy that can be cultivated through the act of letter writing.

2. *Adaptation* This film includes by far the most hilarious portrayal of writer's block of any film on this list—because we get to hear the neurotic thoughts of writer Charlie Kaufman as he attempts to adapt Susan Orlean's novel *The Orchid Thief* into a screenplay. The film also layers this effort with Orlean's own process of composing the *New Yorker* articles that eventually became the basis for the book and Charlie's twin/alter ego's flighty-yet-successful foray into his own screenwriting project. It is a masterfully intertwined portrayal of multiple types of writing, approaches to writing, and attitudes about writing: from the idealistic to the pragmatic to the cynical.

1. *Shrink* It may not be apparent at first glance in what way this film highlights the power of writing or why it is my top choice (and I don't want to give it away). But once again we see in this gem of a

film an interesting juxtaposition between the "business" of writing and the very private act of letter writing (and, I would submit, THE most intimate type of letter writing) and just how very powerful (and in the best cases, healing) that gesture of writing—and the gesture of sharing it—can be.

BONUS—DOCUMENTARIES

Wordplay Because, as director Patrick Creadon reveals, even puzzle writing is writing—and it has its own process and conventions, along with some surprising fans.

Ken Burns's *The Civil War* This is history as storytelling, and presents a fascinating array of types of storytelling which collectively conveys the beauty of expression by all who shared it, regardless of education or economic level.

The Stones of Summer A fascinating account of an obscure writer and a filmmaker's quest to find him. What is it about writing that a person will devote his entire life to telling one story—even if no one reads it? Is the act of writing an end in itself? Dow Mossman apparently thought so.

(POSSIBLY) OBVIOUS OMISSIONS

The Notebook Haven't seen it. Not going to. Don't ask.

The Lake House Yes, this film does portray that intimacy of letter writing I mentioned above, but LETTERS DO NOT travel across time!!! PLEASE don't insult me.

P. S. I Love You Maybe it's just me, but I can't grasp the death of a spouse as the subject for a romantic comedy. Also, if my spouse were dying I'd want him to the last of his time WITH me, not squirreled away somewhere writing secret letters!

The Bridges of Madison County We're so over this one now, aren't we? I certainly hope so.

Writer's Block: The Calm Before the Brainstorm

By Molly Castellano '10 & Gwen Lovekin '10
Writing Tutors

As you sit in front of the computer, trying so hard just to start typing, the blank page with its blinking cursor may seem to mock you—pointing out the fact that you're completely and utterly at a loss for words. Writer's block can attack anyone, even the most experienced writer. Famous writers like Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Ernest Hemingway had been known to suffer from writer's block during their careers.

This psychological issue causes writers to become stuck. Writer's block can occur at the beginning of a project, midway through, or even mid-sentence. So what causes writer's block? One of the most common causes is our inner editor, who screams and forces us as writers to doubt our writing skills. We are often our own worst critics, especially when it comes to the written word.

The best way to overcome writer's block will depend on your individual needs, but there are methods that have been proven to work. Try one, two, or all of the techniques listed below in order to jumpstart your process.

Write. Anything. Sometimes you may feel like you have to start things at the beginning and finish at the end, but when you begin writing, you do not have to start with your opening paragraph. For example, when you are handed an assignment, begin writing right away. If you have a great idea for a quotation you want to use in your paper, write it down. If you jolt awake in the middle of the night with the perfect closing sentence, write it down. For goodness sake, if you are in the middle of a shower and the perfect thesis hits you, write it down! Compile all your inspiration and ideas in one place. When you start to put your ideas into a logical order, you will have already made great progress.

Outline your ideas. Not feeling any literary inspiration? Not a problem. Simply outline the ideas you have for your project. What do you want to write about first? Last? What are some of the most important details you need to include in your writ-

ing? Once you have these basic thoughts on paper, you can begin to elaborate. Before you know it, you'll have a whole page full of ideas to help you get started.

Read more about your topic. Sometimes when you are having a hard time getting started, especially on a research paper, it may be because you just don't know enough about your subject. Sure, you have your textbook and maybe one other source, but is that enough? In order to write fluently about the Civil War, for example, you need to be knowledgeable about the Civil War. Go to the (gasp) library, and read up on the Civil War. Find an aspect of the topic that interests you, and read more about it. With a little determination, you can find something that sparks your interest. By developing an abiding or deep interest in what you are writing, you will find it easier to actively engage.

Computer? What computer? Here's a strategy that might be outside your realm of imagination, but bear with me. Turn off your computer. Now, remember that thing you bring with you to class? No, not your cell phone. Not your coffee. Your three ring notebook. Like a computer, this old-fashioned device is a perfectly acceptable writing tool. In fact, you might find that when you separate yourself from the terror of the blinking cursor, you have much to write about. Give it a try!

Visit the Writing Center. Make an appointment with one of the tutors at the Writing Center for some assistance with your paper. We can help you with your writing in any stage of completion. If you find yourself unable to draw your ideas together to write a competent conclusion, come to us. If you have written out what you want to say, but you're not sure if it will make sense to anyone but you, come to us. If you need help developing a thesis or incorporating quotations or making your descriptive essay so life-like that it just jumps off the page, come to us.