



# The Writing Center Newsletter

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## INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

The Mechanics of Good Fiction	2
Message from the Director	3
Website Review: GoogleScholar	3
Interview with a Tutor	4
Writing Center Tutors	4

## Outlines: Writing Before Writing

By Geoffrey Wykes, WC Tutor

Doing research is hard enough, gathering sources, data, quotes, graphs, and the occasional picture. The hardest part is yet to come, however—putting your research into words and fitting it all on ten pages. Somehow, it never manages to do it on its own, but an outline is the next best thing. It gives a chance to improve a paper before writing it, gives organization and order, and, above all, makes it easier to write.

Here's a quick way to get started. Take a look at the subject. How many parts? A basic ten-page research paper has room for three or so basic sections: two isn't enough, and five doesn't allow much depth. As a good paragraph should be between a half-page and a full page long, ten pages gives close to 20 paragraphs, including one for an introduction and another for the conclusion.

Preparing the outline, follow a simple rule: every level becomes a paragraph. Three main ideas gives three paragraphs, four subheadings gives four paragraphs, and so on. Organizing it this way allows a much clearer paper; each point must be addressed fully; if it's not worth a paragraph, it's probably not strong enough to support the thesis.

At each level, starting with the main ideas and working down to the subheadings, write the topic sentence for that paragraph. This works as a framework for the actual writing, giving an idea of the paragraph; deleting a sentence in an outline is easier than deleting a paragraph.

Now place the citation of the source under its topic sentence, as well as any quotes. When writing the final paragraphs, there's no need to fumble through an immense stack of sources—it's all already there.

By now, the outline has taken its final form. Each level has a topic sentence, from primary ideas to supporting paragraphs, and under each is the supporting information. Already, the paper's well along; all that needs doing is the paragraph bodies, introduction, and conclusion. The paragraphs don't even need to be completed in order—if writer's block strikes, one can proceed to another paragraph without fear of important information.

An outline is not added to the work of writing a paper; it's a tool that can be used to make things immensely easier. Time spent on an outline is time saved on a paper, and time saved on an assignment is always time well spent!

## Did You Know...

The Modern Language Association updated citation rules this year. You can find the new updates at <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/557/15/>



## An Introduction to the Mechanics of Good Fiction

By Nathan Elias, WC Tutor

Young creative writers often begin without any real understanding of the mechanics of storytelling. It is easy to start or finish a piece based on an idea that one simply finds interesting, but there are certain elements that a writer must be aware of in order to make the piece intriguing to the reader. There are fundamentals of both form and content that a writer must grasp in order to complete a good piece of fiction.

For a writer to embark on developing a piece of traditional fiction, that writer must understand **plot**. Beginners are easily confused by the difference between plot and story. Good works of fiction ride on a character's plot, not the entire story. The story might be a character's entire life while the plot may be just one year. Never be discouraged; the world of writing is very tough, but a good fiction writer must be disciplined to break through.

One question that a writer might ask is where to begin the plot. Once a story is in the works, focus on where things really start getting good. Usually, this involves an "**inciting incident**" in the character's life. There are two broad categories where a plot should begin; when the character experiences **trouble** or when there is a change in his or her life. For example, the plot may begin with the main character discovering that he or she has a terminal illness. This incorporates both trouble and change.

After deciding where the plot begins, a fiction writer will eventually need to figure out what happens and what makes it end. To keep the plot interesting, a writer must include things that will challenge the character. These could be **external** or **internal** obstacles. A

character may be a young man bullied around in high school. An external obstacle could be the bullies physically threatening him. An internal one could be the young man teetering on the edge of instability.

So, now the plot must come to an end. It may seem difficult to figure out where to end the piece, but if the writer have successfully put the character through some sort of conundrum where he or she has experienced a change, then the ending is not far away. It should end, relatively, when the character realizes (or fails to realize) that he or she has changed in some way. Perhaps the character is a detective and, after letting the murderer get away, realizes that he or she is not meant to be a detective.

Plot is not the only thing that needs careful attention, either. **Concrete Details** are another element in which the writer must be completely conscious. These details are especially important in the **opening** of the story. Within the first few lines, a good writer will establish **space** and **speaker**. Make sure that the reader can clearly understand who is speaking and who is listening. Also establish where and when the story is taking place. This does not necessarily mean that the story needs to begin like this: Jack decided to kill Jill in the alleyway behind the gas station in Toledo, Ohio. As a writer, integrate these techniques creatively. The opening passage may look something like: Jack had always been a jealous lover and when he saw Jill behind the gas station with another man, he couldn't control himself.

Now that the opening

establishes some trouble or change to hook the reader, the writer is ready to start thinking about the **complexities**, something all great works of fiction have. While a story can be good or successful with a simple "point A to point B" story arc, it can be amazing with some elements lurking under the surface. Complexities include metaphors, symbolism, motifs, double meanings, tone, or parallelism. A writer should be consciously trying to create dimensions. The story may take place during the civil war with the young protagonist a northerner and his antagonist a southerner. On the surface, the men are at war but there is also an implicit commonality of death.

The final objective as a creative writer is to **stimulate** thoughts and feelings, not **emulate** them. The worst thing a writer could do is explain why their characters feel a certain way. For example, do not write: "Sophia was sad. Tears went down her face and she felt goose bumps." Instead, stimulate these feelings in the reader's subconscious; readers shouldn't have to think before they feel. A more adequate way of executing this might be: "Sophia dropped her face into her trembling hands. Tears leaked through her fingers and, as the wind across her sweaty arms, making the hair rise along with little, baby bumps."

With these devices applied, a writer may find that he or she has a very promising piece of fiction. This is only where the practice begins; however, the learning never stops. Never be discouraged; the world of writing is very tough, but a good fiction writer must be disciplined to break through.

## Writing is Just as Hard as You Think It Is

By Barbara Schneider, Director of the Writing Center

According to cognitive psychologists, the hardest mental work the human brain does is writing. When they wire up people’s heads and watch their brains while they write, they see four or five different areas of the brain light up the screen. Those lights go on because in order to write, people have to access their short term memory for the information they are considering, their long term memories for the skills they need, a different area of the brain for language, and yet another part of their brain to process them all together. Higher math doesn’t require as much brain power!

To make matters worse, the kind of writing we do varies wildly, depending on the topic we are writing about, the audience we are writing for, the amount of knowledge we have about the topic, and who the audience is. How much a person knows about a certain topic greatly affects how well and how easily they can write about it—they don’t need to use as much short-term memory and long-term memory to process their writing. So, when a student who writes well in a class about a favorite subject moves into a class about which they know almost nothing, they may experience a great deal of trouble writing. In fact, we frequently have

faculty members tell us that their students were not taught anything in their composition courses, judging from the papers they receive.

The problem here is transfer. Confronted with a subject we don’t understand and told to write a document we don’t recognize, we all might look as though we were never taught anything. One of the key strengths writing tutors offer is that they help writers struggling with a new subject or genre remember what they already know and help them transfer those skills to a new subject and a new kind of document. For example, if you wrote a successful research paper in Comp I, and you are now asked to write an annotated bibliography for your psychology class, you can draw on your ability to summarize—which you undoubtedly practiced as a way of reporting research—and your ability to provide citation information to create a successful bibliography.

You know more than you think and our job is to give your brain a little help. We will remind of what you already know and help you apply it in a new situation.

## Writing Website Review: Google Scholar

By Michael Medlen, WC Tutor



“Stand on the shoulder of giants.” The quote is displayed in a small, green font at the bottom of the Google Scholar search engine, at <http://scholar.google.com/>, and subtly suggests the ease available to researchers through the website.

Can you remember a time when you could not find reliable information for an essay while writing it the night before it was due? Did you ever need a scholarly book review for Ernest Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea* but could only find the IMDB website for the movie *Grumpy Old Men*? With only the click of a mouse button you can now find this information, such as journal articles, from the original source and with the proper citation.

“Stand on the shoulder of giants.”

Google Scholar

can be as simple as typing in your subject in the search box and hitting the enter key. The site works just like its parent site Google: type your subject and the site will show you a multitude of results with descriptions under the bottom of each link. However, if simplicity is not your style, just click on the “Advanced Scholar Search” link next to the “search” button. There you can change the language that you view your information in, narrow the number of search results, or even allow the site to show links to import citation to a number of helpful bibliography software.



**Writing Center**  
**1005 Carlson**  
**Library**  
**Hours: Monday-**  
**Thursday 10-8pm**  
**Friday 10-5pm**  
**(walk-in day)**  
**Phone: 419-530-4939**



## Writing Center Tutors

Many University of Toledo undergraduates, graduates, and faculty visit the Writing Center every year. They meet with tutors, who are dedicated to improving the writing skills of their tutees. While all of the tutors are knowledgeable and trained in various writing strategies, there are four types of tutors employed by The Writing Center to help those with specialized needs.

- *Undergraduate tutors* are all trained in various writing strategies to help writers with development and organization in their papers.
- *English as Second Language tutors* (ESL tutors) are trained to help ESL students with language barriers when it comes to their written work. They can also help with reading and comprehension work, if it is necessary.
- *Graduate tutors* have some experience teaching, which helps them to identify problems in papers. While undergraduate tutors and graduate tutors do many of the same things, graduate tutors work primarily with graduate students.
- *Professional tutors* are tutors that hold advanced MA or Ph.D. degrees. They often serve graduate students and faculty, although are able to work with students at any level with their writing.

The Writing Center tutors have backgrounds in different areas so that they can meet the needs of a diverse community of writers. No matter what needs or concerns are brought to the Writing Center, the knowledgeable and friendly staff is able to meet them.

## An Interview with Cristen Bartus, WC Tutor

By Sheri Benton, WC Tutor

Cristen Bartus is a law student who has been tutoring at the Writing Center for four years, two of those when she was an undergrad majoring in International Business/Marketing with a minor in Spanish. She is sitting for the North Carolina bar exam and is interested in practicing consumer advocacy and bankruptcy law.

Q: What do you like about being a tutor?

The unselfish reason is because I can help people realize that they *can* write. People come in all the time who say "I can't write" and then I read their work and find that's not the case at all.

The selfish reason is because of the interesting tidbits I learn from reading people's papers. Since the writing center welcomes students from all majors, I am exposed to a wide variety of topics—from the nutrition habits of high schoolers to the physiology of the hip joint to the ethics of being a police officer to the stock market in China.

For more information about the Writing Center, visit our website:  
[www.utoledo.edu/centers/writingcenter](http://www.utoledo.edu/centers/writingcenter)

Q: What's the best book you read in the past year?

*Marco Polo Didn't Go There* by Rolf Potts. Potts is a travel writer and a teacher of travel writing, and this book is a collection of his travel narratives. What makes the book unique are the endnotes after each story that offer insight into how or why he wrote in the style that he did for that particular piece.

Q: What book do you want to read, but haven't had time for yet?

*The Geography of Bliss* by Eric Weiner—He travels to all the countries that are ranked the happiest in the world and tries to find out why. Then he goes to one country that is ranked among the unhappiest—Moldova—and compares. From the bits I've read here and there, happiness has to do with how much a culture values the virtue [of] helping each other out.

Q: Advice for students editing/revising their papers:

Don't get discouraged by having to make a lot of corrections. Even the most brilliant writers go through dozens of drafts and revisions.