

Workplace Writing Centers

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The next great frontier for writing centers could be the workplace. Inadequate writing skills is one of the most common complaints among employers. Employers can't count on all employees coming in with the same writing background and skill level, so having an on-site writing resource can be a huge support that saves time and money. Many workplaces have writing styles that are unique to their specific industry, company, or function, and even talented writers will face some adjustments upon being hired. Such has been the case at the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia, where we have a thriving workplace writing center.

Background

The Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia's workplace writing center is promoted as a voluntary professional development resource that fosters independent writing and revision skills and encourages writers to maintain ownership of their work. One-on-one consultations are offered to staff at all levels and of all abilities; these consultations closely mirror the same techniques and values practiced in consultations at traditional academic writing centers.

Most of the employees who use the writing center (we can simply call them writers!) are bank examiners. These writers conduct bank examinations to ensure that banks are complying with regulation and are operating safely and soundly. The result of most examinations is a full report or inspection letter that is delivered to the board of directors and management of the bank. While writers were highly knowledgeable in their content areas, they had been struggling with writing deliverables that were clear, focused, and appropriate for a given audience and purpose. They faced additional challenges that would be familiar to those in many professional environments:

- Reports are frequently written by a combination of over ten people, and the lead writer can become frustrated with trying to smooth many different styles into one voice.
- Written deliverables are confidential, high-stakes documents that have a real-world impact on our District's banks and the public that they serve.
- The only writing assistance available in the past was from an editor who essentially rewrote reports before they entered a formal review process. Though this made the writing marginally better, the process was tedious and did nothing to improve writers' actual skills.
- Writers complained that they hardly recognized their reports after they had gone through the formal review process. They were so discouraged by the number of tracked revisions that few took the time to comb through the written feedback and learn from it.

History

In the fall of 2013, the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia opened a position for someone who could help improve their staff's writing, though the description was vague and suggestively editorial. My interview for the position was more of an open conversation about what I would do if given the opportunity to work with their writers. I had personally been entrenched in writing center work for about five years at that point—as an undergraduate tutor, a graduate tutor, the assistant director of a university writing center, and a founder of two different high school writing centers. I had just graduated with my M.A. in composition, language, and rhetoric. Naturally, I spent the entire two-hour interview gushing about the virtues of writing centers and what this model may offer the Reserve Bank.

I was fortunate to have interviewed with some *very* open-minded people who understood the value in working with the writers and not just the writing. Since then, the writing center has become established as a well-recognized resource within our department and beyond. The writing center serves a number of functions: offering on-on-one and group writing consultations; conducting workshops on various topics; providing training for writers new to the workplace; developing, publishing, and distributing writing guides and resources; and creating a space where writers can bring questions without fear of judgment or repercussion. Because writers frequently travel to conduct bank examinations, the writing center offers synchronous services via telephone or Skype. In fact, 51% of consultations are conducted remotely.

Our writing center's first focus was on the bank examiners in our department, but we have since been able to expand services to the wider department and even within the entire Reserve Bank. Within the past year, other Reserve Banks in the Federal Reserve System have reached out to express interest in the writing center. To handle the influx in requests for services, a second consultant was hired to work with local writers, and I began conducting small, remote pilots with other Reserve Banks. This is allowing us to test whether our model is easily and efficiently applied in other districts—so far, it seems to be.

Logistics

Budget and Sustainability

It is impossible to talk about creating a writing center in *any* context without considering what budgeting will be available. This is one area where workplace writing centers may have a distinct advantage over academic writing centers. While academic writing center directors too often find themselves wrestling with administration over budgeting, corporate entities and federal agencies may have greater means and immediately apparent incentive to invest in a writing center. As long as we are able to prove that we have benefited staff in our Reserve Bank and within the Reserve System, budgeting has thus far not been a concern for our writing center. We still have to hire strategically and spend prudently, but we have a good amount of leeway in terms of purchasing resources and materials that will aid staff.

Staffing and Training

Two and a half years after the writing center opened, we hired our second consultant, Chantel Gerardo, a former writing center tutor and special education/English teacher. We hope to keep expanding as more and more writers find this service useful, and as more Reserve Banks request pilots.

Because our consultants will always be expected to have experience as a writing center tutor or administrator, we do not focus on training staff in terms of tutoring practices. We do, however, help new staff adjust to our particular writing standards and style, as well as to adjust to our particular workplace culture. Writers work with the writing center before submitting their deliverables to a formal review process, which includes several tiers of managers, officers, and content specialists. Though two editorial review stages within this process are conducted by a writing center consultant, this is separate from the one-on-one work we do in the writing center. This is where a new consultant begins on-the-job training; by reading a variety of documents and editing for our particular style, (s)he can become more comfortable with the material before working directly with writers.

Promotion of Services

Though we do create and distribute materials such as pocket-sized writing guides and promotional pens, our services seem most effectively promoted by word-of-mouth, especially when it comes from someone higher up in the department. I would like to believe it's our splashy, quarterly newsletter that draws people in, or the pitches we give from time to time in department-wide meetings, but the truth is that most people are encouraged to try the writing center when a manager, officer, or assistant vice president recommends it. Nonetheless, that is a great tool for us to reach writers. We are careful to maintain the writing center as a neutral space, where writers can improve their skills without fear that we will relay their performance back to their manager.

Physical Space

Our writing center is technically two small offices side-by-side: one room for each consultant. Upon accepting my position, I had explained that it was important to have a private space to conduct sessions so that writers felt more comfortable coming for assistance. Each office has a large desk and a small table with two chairs for conducting sessions. Our physical space has been described as “alarmingly colorful” by some of the more rigid examiners and economists in our workplace. True, it is teeming with writing resources, “word of the day” displays, and a rainbow of post-its and pens. To many, this has come as a welcome step away from a generally more sterile professional environment. I have expressed the hope that we can one day have a more open, shared space where teams can work collaboratively whenever they wish; two small offices side-by-side is limiting, and sometimes requires us to step out to a conference room if multiple writers want to share a session. Cross your fingers for us!

Challenges

Identity

Our unique context lends some unique challenges, too. One of the most difficult challenges, especially when we first opened, was navigating tutor/consultant identity. I had been trained as and had trained peer tutors, but my colleagues didn't want a peer. They wanted an expert. If they had to approach someone for writing assistance—which was difficult for people, especially if they had a long career at the Federal Reserve—then they wanted someone who advertised themselves as a writing *master*. This wasn't at first comfortable for me, but advertising my experience and education helped create some buy-in. Some writers also expected me to have a working knowledge of content, which I very clearly *did not*. I am careful and

quick to point out to people that I do not have any background in finance, economics, or banking, but that this is why working collaboratively and synchronously is so important. I also stress that my lack of content expertise is what allows the writer to maintain ownership of the piece and control over the session; I can give them the tools that they need to communicate more clearly and effectively, but they are responsible for their own work and for the message that is delivered to the reader. Most writers are happy to maintain this content control.

Diversity

Although many academic writing centers work with diverse populations, age adds another dimension to our diversity. In undergraduate programs especially, anyone outside of their late teens or early twenties is labeled “nontraditional,” an outlier. We have a wide spread of diverse employees who can range from being college (and even high school) interns, to being decades older and nearing retirement. Because our writing center is staffed by two consultants who are young (and look, unfortunately for now, even younger) it was difficult to earn some employees’ recognition of us as even a peer consultant, much less the writing “expert” that they were looking for. Furthermore, we are two liberal arts-types who have found ourselves in a department devoted to supervision, credit, and regulation. We are a far cry from the highly technical worlds of most of our writers. But supporting our practices with measures of success and making ourselves more visible within the department has helped us to combat some of the stereotypes initially thrust upon us.

Confidentiality & Manager Relationships

As I’ve alluded to earlier, we occupy a somewhat precarious space between managers and their staff. We rely on managers to encourage their staff to visit us, especially when staff members struggle with writing. However, we don’t want to fall into a role of evaluating writers and reporting back to managers in a way that could compromise a formal performance evaluation. This was a *huge* concern for writers early on: They felt that bringing in a less advanced piece of writing could negatively impact a manager’s view of them. We have also found ourselves in positions where managers try to require writers to work with us, but they have misjudged the writer’s abilities or challenges when referring them to us. We often have to deal with these challenges on a case-by-case basis, but overall, we are careful to defend the writing center as a neutral space that allows writers a sense of confidentiality.

Product, Not Process, as Measure of Success

The *better writers, not better writing* axiom is so familiar and logical to me that I refused to depart from it when I first began tutoring in the workplace. This eventually required some flexibility on my part, as—predictably—the “numbers people” I worked with asked for some numbers on our department’s writing. Though they appreciated the approach that we took to improve the problem at its source (the writers’ ability), they ultimately wanted to measure the improvement in our written deliverables. To meet this demand, we periodically conduct side-by-side case studies of reports that have and have not gone through the writing center prior to entering the formal report review process. We have also conducted a more comprehensive study in which six senior officers were trained to score writing on a rubric; we were able to use pre-writing center and post-writing center samples to prove an increase in quality. To keep a focus on our writers, we do use a post-session survey to track how satisfied users are with the service and what we can do to improve their experience.

Successes

The Numbers

Perhaps the most significant success we've had has simply been writers' increased willingness to use the writing center. Our return rate is about 60%, and that doesn't account for turnover (which would prevent staff from returning). The post-session survey that we've been using for about eighteen months indicates that 100% of writers are highly satisfied with the writing center's convenience, and 98.3% are highly satisfied with the quality of consultations. When we assessed the writing samples mentioned above, we found that writing quality increased by 36% after a writing center consultation, and that most of that improvement was related to higher-order concerns such as clarity and organization (as opposed to lower-order concerns such as grammar and mechanics).

Mindset

I consider it an additional success that our department is much more open to writing feedback. Workshops are in increasingly high demand, not just within our department, but within the Reserve Bank and the Reserve System. Each year we've been open, we've surpassed the number of consultations that were held the previous year. I'm always excited by the prospect that my colleagues are seeing learning and writing as lifelong processes, rather than something they left behind long ago in school.

Lessons Learned

I think the bottom line of this venture into workplace writing centers is: **There's a world of potential.** For anyone interested in creating their own workplace writing center, I recommend gaining the support of higher-ranking leaders in order to get the buy-in of employees from other levels. It's vital to consider each individual workplace's population and unique needs, as well as who stands to benefit from their improvement. There is a widespread need for better writing support and resources in the professional world, but there's no clear market for them to tap in to. It took a writing center "pitch" in my interview to convince them to invest. And on an ongoing basis, metrics are likely to take a different focus on the workplace—it typically requires looking at how much time/effort is saved as opposed to student/employee retention rates. It's also important to begin keeping accurate records from your very first day of operation. We constantly pull data from our records to support new initiatives and to prove quarterly or yearly progress.

Overall, there are far more similarities between workplace and academic writing centers than there are differences. Writing centers can uniquely position themselves within workplace environments to benefit professionals. Perhaps a rise in workplace writing centers could also serve to further legitimize the important work we do in writing centers every day across our institutions.

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