

NACADA Writing Group Philosophy

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The NACADA Writing Support Initiative began as a way to support the NACADA Center for Research and offer support to academic advisers at all stages of the research and writing process. The principle architects of the initiative were Dr. Wendy Troxel, Director of the NACADA Center for Research at Kansas State University and Dr. Rhonda Dean Kyncl, Associate Dean for Students at the University of Oklahoma who earned a PhD in Rhetoric & Composition.

Dr. Troxel and Dr. Dean Kyncl base the foundation, structure, and approach of the initiative on the principles of Writing Center philosophy that have been practiced since 1983 (and before) as outlined by the International Writing Center Association, an assembly of the National Council for Teachers of English. Our philosophy is summed up in three assumptions:

- 1) we will employ a “tutorial approach to writing” (Harris, 1988),
- 2) we will honor the writer’s voice, and,
- 3) we will focus on writing as process in community.

The International Writing Center Association describes the “tutorial approach to writing” and serves as our foundational philosophy of how NACADA writing groups should function:

In the writing center, the uniqueness of each writer is acknowledged as well as the writer’s individual needs and the benefits the writer can gain from personal attention. ...The function of the tutor, on the other hand, is to provide nonevaluative, immediate oral feedback, to attend only to that student’s questions, and to engage with the student in some active planning, drafting, or revising. The tutor’s goal in working on a specific paper with a student is to help that student develop general writing skills. Tutors often rely on asking questions that help students find their own answers, thereby keeping the tutorial an interactive situation in which the student is encouraged to do as much or more talking than the tutor. Numerous studies indicate not only that tutorial instruction benefits writers but also that it enhances their motivation and attitudes. Anxieties about writing are reduced by helpful coaching, positive reinforcement, and the friendly listening ear of the tutor (Harris, 1988).

The members of writing groups are NOT (necessarily) writing instructors or teachers. We expect that everyone in a group is a professional and already has the ability to communicate effectively. It’s fine to come to the group with a question about grammar or style, but we encourage the group to look up the answers to such questions using online style guides or online writing labs (Purdue University, for example, has one of the best and most extensive online writing labs in the world, and it’s freely accessible to everyone). No one in the group will set themselves up as a writing instructor or the resident grammar checker. The point of the writing groups is to serve as “peer tutors” to other colleagues in the group; to provide personal attention, “nonevaluative, immediate oral feedback,” and to attend to the writer’s concerns about their work, not to advance anyone else’s agenda.

August 8, 2019

Furthermore, the NACADA Writing Support Initiative believes explicitly in the power of a writing community. Again, the IWCA and NCTE provide our foundational philosophy:

In a room full of other writers, writers collaborate with their tutors.... Writers are thus assisted in discarding the antiquated view of the lonely writer secluded from the world as she struggles to communicate with an unknown, unseen audience. Writing centers also reinforce the generally accepted emphasis on writing as a process, for in the center writers actually engage in writing processes with tutors as they learn by doing how to plan, to brainstorm, to ask questions for revision, to rework written text, to add variety to sentence structure, to organize large amounts of material into a research paper, to proofread, and so on. Two cardinal rules for writing centers are that there be easily accessible stacks of scratch paper lying around and that the pen remain in the hand of the writer (Harris, 1988).

NACADA Writing Groups will follow these basic tenets: first and foremost that **“the pen remain in the hand of the writer.”** No one else is responsible for the writing other than the author. And at all costs, the writing group should serve as a support and source of feedback. In addition, writing groups will focus on building a community of support that the writer may access at any time to gain confidence, to elicit feedback, and to offer revisions.

“Resident experts” within the group may damage this communal relationship by trampling on the voices and work of others. When colleagues become so heavy-handed with their review of another writer’s work that they are marking through their words or crossing out paragraphs, they have taken over that work and made it their own. That is NOT the purpose of a writing group. **Our goal is for each writer to feel empowered and enabled to bring their own ideas into the open and write about their experiences in their voices.** A heavy-handed critique may victimize another writer. Certainly, we expect members of the group to ask questions of the writer about portions of the work they don’t understand. They should offer perspective on what the writer has written and express truthfully when they lose track of the main idea or thread. But they should stop short of making another writer’s work sound like their own.

PROCESS will be a focus of writing groups as well. The basic stages of the process as we understand them are: invention (or pre-writing), drafting, revising, editing, & publishing. In the early stages of invention and drafting, we will focus on the BIG IDEAS: the main idea, how the article connects ideas from one to the next, whether or not the idea speaks to resonant issues in academic advising, if the reader can follow the writer’s train of thought...big picture issues. A focus on grammar in the invention stage will invariably create a situation that stymies the writer’s creativity and imagination. Focusing on this process also ensures that the work of the writing groups does not devolve into a critique of writers but **always focuses on the products created by the writers.**

SOURCE: Harris, Muriel. “SLATE (Support for the Learning and Teaching of English) Statement: The Concept of A Writing Center.” The National Council of Teachers of English, 1988. <http://writingcenters.org/writing-center-concept-by-muriel-harris/>. Accessed July 16, 2019.

August 8, 2019