

UAF Writing Studio - “Any student, any paper, any step of the process”

Hello, friends, and welcome to the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville. My name is Chris Borntrager--I’m the coordinator for the Writing Studio, U of A’s writing center. I’m writing to tell you about our services and explain our method.

I would love to hear from you, whether you need help with a writing assignment, want to integrate writing center visits into your class, or if you just want to talk about writing. We also offer classroom workshops that introduce our services. Please email me at clborntr@uark.edu or call 479-575-7057 if you need anything at all. You and your students can also visit our website at: <https://success.uark.edu/academic-initiatives/writing-studio.php> if you would like to make appointments.

Here is us in a nutshell:

We serve all U of A students (grad and undergrad), acting as mentors, tutors, and sounding boards for any piece of writing, including research papers, scholarship essays, or dissertations. Our services are included in U of A students’ tuition fees, so it comes at no extra cost to them. We host one-on-one, 40-minute appointments both on-site and remotely (Zoom) as well as ~20-minute drop-in appointments. We have a wide range of student staff working as consultants: PhD students, MFA students, and undergraduates in a range of majors.

We in the writing center business often encounter what we call the “fix-it shop” stereotype, the assumption that only “bad” writers need to come to the writing center because we are the ones who are supposed to bring “bad” papers up to snuff. The assumption is fair enough, since we do indeed help writers revise their texts, but our work is also more than that: **we are in the business of making better writers, not just better texts.** We help add a “human” touch to writing assignments in a time when the act of writing is constantly being dehumanized, not only by the introduction of GenAI but also because large class sizes often make individual attention and assessment difficult or impossible.

Our method is based in dialogue: a writer meets with a reader (who is trained to facilitate meaningful dialogue about the texts), and they talk through the text and the activities that produced it, teasing out the hidden milestones and skills that are directly relevant to a writer’s success and giving the texts a “test run” to see what kind of impact it makes on a human reader.

In the following two paragraphs, I discuss the need for one-on-one encounters in a writer’s development (and a final explanation of our method), so go no further unless you want a heavy dose of pedantry:

Educational researchers have known for a while that all authentic learning, far from being a mechanical transfer of knowledge from teacher to student, takes place within the context of social relationships—who has the knowledge and who is the learner, who makes the rules of engagement in a class or mentoring relationship, where and how high the bar is, and what kinds of cultural and social activities are requisite to success in a particular learning environment. There is a reason that, when you overhear students talking with each other about a particular class, they immediately begin to describe not the assessment methods etc., but the teacher themselves. Most of the writing that students do in higher education, furthermore, is insular and impersonal compared to most of the writing they will do in their careers, where writing is addressed to a particular audience and a clearly-defined task. In college writing, however, a paper is often composed in isolation and submitted to a distant reader who remarks on the paper's form, and there ends the exchange. Even in well-designed writing classes, context, audience, and purpose are frequently theoretical exercises rather than experiences because there simply isn't time for meaningful interactions between the writer and a reader.

Having taught composition for over ten years, I have become convinced that extended encounters with truly engaged readers are fundamental for any writer's development. This is the real value of what we offer at the Writing Studio—a **chance for student writers to have an in-depth dialogue with trained, attentive, and empathetic readers who respond to them in real time**, expressing confusion at an incomplete thought, exclaiming at a new idea, nodding at a well-made point. These kinds of experiences lead writers not only to a deeper understanding of writing strategies also to understand one of the deeper truths about written communication: that they are writing for real people.

I wish you all the best as you start your work here at U of A!

-Chris Borntrager
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