

# THE SOUNDING BOARD

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## SPEAKING AS A RESPONDENT: WRITING COLLEAGUES AND THE POWER OF LISTENING

Even though writing colleagues complete a full semester of training before they are given their placements, the core of WC training fosters a skill we all learn as children: listening. The work of the writing colleague depends not only on quality listening, but responses and questions that drive the conversation based on what the student colleague has said. We encourage writing colleagues to ask questions that are meant to give students the opportunity to discover what they already know or have access to once they are asked to think critically. We call it being *facilitative* as opposed to being *directive*. One goal of the writing colleague is to be a mentor who models intellectual inquiry, which often is about asking the right questions and not about getting the right answers.

For example, a few weeks ago one writing colleague told me about a student who had been struggling with writing in all of her classes. Her first drafts were extremely general and did not address the essay prompts with enough depth. By the third draft the student was saying to the writing colleague, "I knew you were going to ask me that!" This was exciting for me to hear because it signified the student was beginning to develop the inner voice that more experienced writers have. (Meyer and Smith, 26) The questions her writing colleague was asking served as a model for developing that inner voice, which now helps her to anticipate what her audience will expect and prompts her to think more critically as well as explore her course work with more depth.

But let us hear about the power of listening from the source. This semester, students in The Writing Colleagues Seminar were asked to write an essay about listen-

ing and connect it to the role of the writing colleague. Hannah Kallet, '10, a writing colleague candidate who has worked with several writing colleagues herself, writes the following on being facilitative and listening:

*For example, it is important to allow the writer to identify his or her weaknesses and problem areas rather than pointing it out to the individual (Meyer and Smith, 9). Rather than bombarding the writer/student with questions, asking minimal questions will give him or her the opportunity to provide information on how a writing colleague can be helpful. For example, by asking open-ended questions, this will encourage students to expand, rather than responding with a simple yes or no answer. This is also a good opportunity to use the suggestion mentioned previously. Pause for a moment after the student has spoken. This will let the student know she is being heard and what she is saying is being registered.*

The following excerpt is from Kathryn Bowering, '11. She discusses the importance of the writing colleague as an outlet for continuing class discussions in a more personalized setting:

*In many of my classes, it is clear that people aren't really invested in what others have to say. Though they don't interrupt or make calls during discussion, students often don't make eye contact with the speaker or process what was said and add in their own comments. In class, I can make a comment, and the professor says "good" or "right." What does that mean to me, though? This feedback (or lack thereof) leaves my thoughts floating. A writing colleague is the perfect outlet for expanding on these ideas, and through the use of open-ended questions, a tutor can "spur a writer to think independently" (Meyer and Smith, 34)... Students might not recognize how unique or bright one of their ideas is because it*

*was left unaddressed in class. I know that sometimes I keep my ideas to myself because no one else in class seems to be speaking up. Meetings with writing colleagues are less intimidating than large class discussions, and through this outlet, tutors can help make sure good ideas don't go to waste.*

Katherine goes on to connect listening to learning to ask the right kinds of questions:

*However, facilitative questioning isn't easy, and it takes practice and developed, active listening skills to become an effective questioner. "A tutor's questions...should derive from the context created by the writer, so a tutor must listen carefully and make judicious use of the writer's vocabulary" (35). Through the use of the skill of facilitative questioning, writing colleagues can break down and expand upon students' thoughts that are otherwise passed over in class.*

Meyer, Emily, and Louise Z. Smith. *The Practical Tutor*. New York: Oxford UP, 1987.

### Heidi Beach, '02, Coordinator

*Interested in a Writing Colleague for your course next semester? Interested in becoming a Writing Colleague? Please contact:*

Professor Mary M. Salibrici  
Director  
Smith Hall 213  
salibrici@hws.edu  
x 3462

Heidi G. Beach  
Coordinator  
Smith Hall 209  
beach@hws.edu  
x 3807

Check out *The Sounding Board* online:  
[www.hws.edu/academics/enrichment/writingcolleagues.asp](http://www.hws.edu/academics/enrichment/writingcolleagues.asp)

“I have rewritten—often several times—every word I have ever published.”

Vladimir Nabokov, novelist, playwright, professor, poet, entomologist

## INFLATED LANGUAGE VS. ACADEMIC TONE:

### LET'S MAKE DISTINCTIONS

Students sometimes think that professors value inflated language or that verbiage shows complexity and depth of one's thinking on a subject. We would argue that this is based more on legend than on fact. We think professors value clarity of expression and organization of ideas over all other writing traits. Overly complex language can get in the way, making the writer's point hard to follow.

#### An example of inflated language:

*In society today, it would be difficult for any individual to deny the fact that with the advance of modern industry, there is a shift in the direction of decreasing marginal utility of males.*

#### The translation:

*Today, men's muscle power is less essential to society than it was before industrialization.*

Which would you rather read?

An academic tone does not mean the writer must embed his or her argument in long, clumsy sentences. An academic tone is both clear and formal. Each discipline has specific terminology, which means students must learn and employ those “50-cent words.” That said, writing with the vocabulary one is comfortable using is the rule (without being too informal). Using the thesaurus for every other word often leads to a convoluted argument and an inauthentic voice.

#### Too informal for most academic writing assignments:

Contractions (*didn't* = *did not*)

Phrasal Verbs (*messed up* = *damaged* or *altered*)

First Person (*I think* = *One can see*)

Slang

Adapted from Kennedy & Smith: *Reading and Writing in the Academic Community* (2006)

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

**Q:** Can you suggest guidelines for students who have just begun thinking about a writing assignment? What's a good plan of attack when one first receives a writing assignment?

**A:** Here's your plan of attack:

1. Read the prompt the entire way through.
2. Underline or circle the portions that you absolutely must know. This information may include due date, research (source) requirements, page length, and format (MLA, APA, CMS).
3. Underline or circle important phrases. You should know your instructor at least a little by now - what phrases does she use in class? Does she repeatedly say a specific word? If these are in the prompt, you know the instructor wants you to use them in the assignment.
4. Think about how you will address the prompt. The prompt contains clues on how to write the assignment. Your instructor will often describe the ideas she wants discussed either in questions, in bullet points, or in the text of the prompt. Think about each of these sentences and number them so that you can write a paragraph or section of your essay on that portion if necessary.
5. Rank ideas in descending order, from most important to least important. Instructors may include more questions or talking points than you can cover in your assignment, so rank them in the order you think is more important. One area of the prompt may be more interesting to you than another.
6. Ask your instructor and/or writing colleague questions (if you have any).
7. After you are finished with these steps, ask yourself the following:

What is the purpose of this assignment? Is my purpose to provide information without forming an argument, to construct an argument based on research, or analyze a poem and discuss its imagery?

Who is my audience? Who else might read this? Will it be published or posted online? What are my readers' expectations?

What resources do I need to begin work? Do I need to conduct literature (hermeneutic or historical) research, or do I need to review important literature on the topic and then conduct empirical research, such as a survey or an observation? How many sources are required?

Who else can I contact to help me if I have questions?

For more information, please go to: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu>