



# Writing Fellow Handbook

George Mason University Writing Center

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## **Introduction**

The purpose of this handbook is to articulate the philosophy and goals behind George Mason University's Writing Fellows Program and help answer some of the questions you may have as participating faculty. In this handbook, you will find specific guidelines and suggestions that will assist you in effectively integrating writing fellows into your course.

Since the Writing Fellows Program is a young program at GMU, our guidelines are based on the experience that we've gained working with faculty, tutors and students in the University Writing Center: our Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) and Peer Tutors programs; GMU's valuable Undergraduate Apprenticeship Program; as well as successful Writing Fellows Programs at other campuses.

This handbook will provide a useful resource that will help make your participation in the Writing Fellows Program a worthwhile and valuable endeavor.

If you have any further questions, please contact Terry Zawacki at 703-993-1187 (tzawacki@gmu.edu)

## **Program Philosophy**

### **What is a Writing Fellows Program?**

Writing Fellows programs operate within a variety of administrative arrangements. While they are often housed in writing centers or within Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) programs, they are generally funded as discrete entities with their own administrative structure and/or budgets to pay fellows and staff support. GMU Fellows work within the administrative structures of both the University Writing Center and the Faculty-Student Undergraduate Apprenticeship Program.

George Mason University Writing Fellows are paid stipends to cover up to ten hours a week working with their faculty mentor, reading drafts, and conferencing with students. Depending on the student and the instructor's goals, the fellow may sit in on class meetings, particularly those devoted to discussions of writing assignments, but he or she is not expected to be an expert in the subject matter or course material apart from the writing itself.

George Mason faculty who wish to be assigned a Fellow consult with the Director of the Writing Center and apply through the **Center for Teaching Excellence**, using the **Teaching Research Apprentice application**. Faculty mentors are expected to abide by articulated program guidelines and sign an agreement indicating that they understand what is expected of them as Writing Fellow mentors. The Writing Fellow also signs an agreement with expectations and duties spelled out.

### **Who Are the GMU Writing Fellows?**

Writing Fellows are typically undergraduate students who have taken CHSS 390: Peer Tutoring in Writing in the Disciplines, a one-credit experiential course. Once they have completed at least a semester of tutoring at the Writing Center, peer tutors may apply for a Writing Fellow position to work with student writers in a specific course under the guidance of a faculty mentor. Fellows come from a wide variety of disciplines and are selected based on their performance as writers and their ability to help others improve their writing.

### **What Do They Do?**

Depending upon the course and the teacher's goals, Writing Fellows assist in any or all of the following activities: help a professor understand the clarity of his/her writing assignments and evaluation criteria; lead workshops on writing issues; meet with students on drafts; make written comments on drafts; and tutor students individually on their

writing. Writing Fellows do not give grades on papers or take the place of the teacher in responding to writing; rather they supplement the writing instruction and sometimes clarify for students the teacher's goals and expectations.

### **What Are the Benefits/Objectives of the Program?**

Writing Fellows play an integral role in advancing and reinforcing the goals of WAC. Teachers, students in the course, and the Writing Fellows all benefit from the opportunity to have focused discussions about writing processes and practices. Having a Writing Fellow allows faculty to emphasize the importance of good writing and provide support for students to become better writers, including the opportunity to revise with feedback, without a significant investment of faculty time. Faculty gain from talking over assignments and evaluation criteria with the Writing Fellow who can offer advice from a student's perspective. By engaging in these processes, the Fellow also gains valuable insights about teaching, writers, and his/her own writing.

### **What is the History of the Writing Fellows Program?**

The first so-named Writing Fellows program was instituted at Brown University. The idea caught on, and the creator of the Brown program went on to provide consultation and training to others who wanted to start at their institutions. While it is hard to determine the exact number of Writing Fellows programs nationally, the University of Richmond (VA), Brigham Young University, Western Washington University, the University of Wisconsin, and LaSalle University are among the most prominent. The Writing Fellows program was established at George Mason University in 2003.

# The Role of the Writing Fellows

## What Can You Expect from Your Fellows?

GMU Writing Fellows are not teachers or graders. They are talented students who are committed to helping their peers become better writers. Writing Fellows are motivated by their own enjoyment of writing and their ability to relate to faculty and peers. As faculty, please remember that Writing Fellows are apprentices and thus look to you for guidance and support. With that said, it's important to note that GMU Writing Fellows bring a high level of competency to their roles.

## What Strengths Do Writing Fellows Bring to the Collaboration?

Prior to becoming a Writing Fellow, a student will have successfully completed **CHSS 390: Peer Tutoring**. In this course, peer tutors are trained how to:

- ◆ Talk about assignments with students
- ◆ Negotiate a session based on what a student wants and what a student needs
- ◆ Avoid falling into the trap of making value judgments of teachers and grades
- ◆ Teach grammar
- ◆ Work with ESL writers
- ◆ Identify and analyze errors
- ◆ Understand and implement the theory and practice of teaching writing
- ◆ Address global issues such as thesis organization
- ◆ Address the mechanics of writing

## **What is Required of Writing Fellows?**

GMU Writing Fellows work ten hours a week, although this may vary depending on teacher and student needs. Within that ten hours, Fellows may fulfill a variety of roles. We'd like to emphasize that our philosophy at GMU is that Writing Fellows are agents of change. They can help faculty develop effective methods of working with writers and writing and thus, these guidelines don't have to be followed exactly as laid out in this handbook. In turn, we want Writing Fellows to engage in an experience that will be most rewarding and educational for them and this, too, may take a number of forms. With that understanding, we'd like to offer a suggested working structure.

### **Expectations of Fellows**

- ◆ Meet a minimum of three times with their faculty sponsor (outlined in following section)
- ◆ Provide input on the syllabus and assignments for the course
- ◆ Collect, make written comments and redistribute a first draft to all students
- ◆ Provide individual tutoring on an as needed/as assigned basis for students
- ◆ Distribute and collect end-of-the course surveys from students and faculty sponsor
- ◆ Complete a Fellows Program evaluation
- ◆ Create a poster presentation describing what has been learned through the experience
- ◆ Sit in on classes that the faculty recommends (specifically those relating directly to the assigned paper)
- ◆ Prepare and conduct in-class workshops on specific topics relating to writing, if desired by faculty

## **How the Writing Fellows Program Operates?**

### **When Should I Meet With My Writing Fellow?**

A minimum of three meetings is required between you and your Fellow but we strongly encourage you to keep in constant contact and provide feedback to one another as the semester progresses.

**The first meeting** between you and your Fellow should take place just prior to or during the first week of class. At this meeting you will want to discuss the syllabus, the assignments, and your criteria for evaluating papers. Make sure that you put your Fellow's name on the syllabus with his or her e-mail address for easy communication. It is also a good idea to include two or three lines explaining to your students what a Fellow does. Establish due dates for drafting procedures. Make sure that you allow two to three weeks between the rough draft and the final paper so that Fellows have enough time to read, comment and distribute the drafts, and students have enough time to revise them before the final due date. Discuss your assignments and be open to feedback from your Fellow. A Fellow can locate points where the assignment is unclear or vague and provide you a window into your students' thinking. Also, discuss together your **criteria** for evaluation of papers and allow input from your Fellow. We strongly suggest that you develop an evaluation/response criteria sheet for each assignment if you don't already have such a rubric. This will help the Fellow know what to focus on in his/her comments.

**The second meeting** should occur after your students' first drafts have been collected but before your Fellow writes comments on them. During this meeting, you should conduct a "normed" reading. A "normed" reading is where you and your Fellow read aloud a draft and pause periodically to allow your Fellow to listen to you as you evaluate the paper and explain your thoughts according to your criteria for evaluation. You should do "normed" readings for three or four papers as the process allows your Fellow to become acquainted with your expectations and standards and provides him/her with some semblance of how

you read. It also allows you and your Fellow to detect certain patterns and issues that are emerging in students' papers.

**The third meeting** should be scheduled after students have turned in their final papers. This meeting provides you and your Fellow an opportunity to discuss issues in students' papers and determine whether students revised their final papers in accordance with the Fellow's comments. This is also the time to discuss the successes and failures of the program and to recommend specific changes.

In addition to these regularly scheduled meetings, you may want to confer with your Writing Fellow once or twice during the drafting process. It is important to let your Fellow know if you disagree with his/her written comments, and it is equally important for your Fellow to see how his/her comments are being received both by you and your students. We have found that the more communication between you and your Fellow, the more successful the program is.

### **How Should I Introduce the Program to My Students?**

It is best to have Writing Fellows come to class during the first or second week of the semester and introduce themselves and the program. This visit will give your students a chance to connect a face to a name and allow them to ask questions about the program. You also should speak about the role of your Fellow and reinforce how the Fellows Program is an integral part of the course. You should emphasize the requirement of a draft. Sometimes, a few words about the importance of revision in your own work helps reassure students and illustrate the point that every writer needs to revise.

## **How Will My Fellow Pick Up and Return Papers?**

Fellows can either arrange to come to class and collect drafts from the students, or they can come to your office and pick them up in your mailbox or directly from you. The advantage of collecting papers directly from the students is that it allows you to note which papers are late. In addition, you can quickly check them over to make sure that the drafts are truly drafts and not incomplete or rough outlines. You may even want to skim through the first two pages of each draft to identify students who may need extra help. This might be the time to suggest or require that a student make a conference with the Fellow to discuss revisions.

Please make sure that you have made your late paper policy clear to your Fellows and your students. If you choose to grant an extension for a late paper, then your Fellow should be granted an extension for his/her written comments as well. Late paper procedures should be determined and enforced by you.

Fellows will come to class on the designated date and return drafts with their written comments to students. This is best done during the last ten minutes of class as it allows Fellows to talk with students and arrange conferences, if necessary or desired. If Fellows cannot come on the designated date and return papers, they will give you the papers to return. Ideally, you will have met with the Fellow, looked over at least some of his/her comments on the drafts so that you can spend time in class addressing the most common strengths and difficulties that the Fellow noted.

You should require your students to include their drafts with the submission of their final papers. This requirement emphasizes the importance you place on revision and it allows you to see how your Fellow's comments have affected your students' revisions.

## **What Kinds of Comments Will Writing Fellows Make?**

Writing Fellows are not teachers. They do not grade or judge. Instead, they ask questions, provoke thought and encourage revision. They praise what works and question areas where they are confused or distracted by irrelevancies or structural or grammatical errors. Fellows examine a paper's organization, style, coherence and clarity but they are not equipped to comment on the accuracy of a paper's content. Fellows keep in mind the "normed" readings that they had with you so that their comments can reflect your expectations and criteria. Fellows act more like educated readers than experienced writers when responding to students' work. In other words, they will record their confusion, dissatisfaction, and enjoyment of the paper as they read it through to the end. They will address global issues such as thesis organization as well as parochial issues such as the mechanics of writing. Fellows' comments are written with the intention of improving students' writing. This may or may not result in improving students' grades.

## **The Evaluation of the Program**

### **How is the Program Evaluated?**

At the end of the program, Fellows will ask you to reserve ten minutes of class time to allow your students to complete a one page **student survey** of the program. Fellows will provide you with an evaluation form specific to the program. These evaluations are very important as they help Fellows assess their strategies and determine goals for future classes. Please ask students to fill out these surveys in class. Students who take them home do not usually complete them.

Please complete a **faculty evaluation** of the program. Fellows will give you a one page form that is specific to faculty. Your evaluation will help us determine what works and

what doesn't. Your input is critical to the success of this program. We welcome your suggestions for improvement.

Along with student and faculty evaluations, Fellows will fill out their own **Fellow survey**. They, too, will evaluate their role and suggest ways to make the program stronger. Fellows will also prepare a poster presentation of their semester experience.

Finally, we hope that you will consider taking your Fellows out to lunch or coffee, or maybe just invite them to your office so that you can formally thank them. Since Fellows are students too, Fellows work hard to complete their class obligations at the same time that they are fulfilling their Writing Fellow commitments. A few words of praise or a nice note can go a long way.