

# Back to the Center History in the Making: The University of North Alabama Center for Writing Excellence

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"History and writing are inseparable. We cannot know history well unless we write about it." --Richard Marius and Melvin E. Page,  
*A Short Guide to Writing about History, 6th edition*

## Building History... Literally

On November 8, 1939, Florence State Teachers College announced the completion of a new student lodge, complete with couches, tables, and a kitchen ("Modernistic" 1). Built by FSTC students under the leadership of the National Youth Administration (NYA), a component of Franklin Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration, the lodge served as a venue for student organization meetings and events for several years. Eventually, however, the Stone Lodge, as it came to be called, became a catch-all for the various odd needs of the university.

### By the Numbers

**University of North Alabama:** approximately 7,200 undergraduate and graduate MA students

**Center for Writing Excellence Director:** Dr. Robert T. Koch Jr.

**CWE Age:** 4 years (2 as an official university academic support service)

**Number of Tutors:** 12-15

**Number of Tutorials:** 925 in Fall 2008

**Hours of operation:** M-F 8-4, M-R 6-9, Sat 10-5, Sun 2-9

**Website:** <http://www.una.edu/writingcenter>

- Through at least 1954, the lodge hosted organizations like the Wesleyan Foundation, which met on Wednesday nights.
- Sometime after 1954 and until 1969, it served as the practice and storage facility for the FSTC marching band.

- Conflicting alumni reports identify the space as having two purposes in the early 1970s. It may have been an audio-visual classroom, but it is also remembered as a greenhouse and primate study site. Since the lodge has two stories, it may well have been both.
- By 1978, the lodge was the home of the Student Government Association (SGA). In Fall 1979, it became the site of an impromptu and heated SGA debate on the separation of church and state that made not only campus news headlines, but local newspaper headlines as well.
- In 1996, fifty-seven years after FSTC President Keller declared that it was "in no sense to be a student hangout throughout the day" ("New" 1), UNA reopened the Stone Lodge as a student social hall, renaming it Leo's, after the university mascot Leo the Lion.

By 2005, the Stone Lodge had become a computer classroom and part-time lab operated jointly by the English department and Collier Library. Because the lodge is located near the geographic center of campus, much of the student body pass the lodge each day, going to and from class, residence halls, and campus parking. For both the English department and the university administration, this fact made the Stone Lodge a logical site for a new writing center. Although geography made this location an obvious choice, the discovery of such a varied history adds to the lodge's appeal.

## Center for Writing Excellence History

The Center for Writing Excellence began as the English department's volunteer effort in spring 2004. Faculty served at least one office hour per week in the center, but this still resulted in limited access and service. Dr. Nicholas Mauriello received permission to hire and train the first peer tutors during the 2006-2007 academic year. From the outset, however, the larger vision was to create a sustainable, full-time program that would serve the entire university community. In 2007, the English department received approval and funding to hire a director for the writing center who would develop it as a university-wide resource for students and faculty.

As the new director, Dr. Robert T. Koch Jr. adopted and expanded the department's vision by creating a Center for Writing Excellence. This Center includes programs to serve not only students, but faculty and the community as well. The Center was given a three part mission: "to provide UNA students at all academic levels with instruction and resources for writing, reading, and writing-as-critical thinking skills development; to provide UNA faculty with teaching resource support and professional development

opportunities in Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) and Writing in the Disciplines (WID); and to facilitate and develop community-oriented writing, reading, and writing-as-critical thinking programs” (“Center”).

### Center for Writing Excellence Services

In the early years, the Stone Lodge was home to a variety of clubs and organizations. Today this variety is reflected in the diversity of CWE academic support programs. Of course, most students and faculty are familiar with the University Writing Center (UWC), where peer tutors provide writing tutorial support to individuals and small groups. UWC half-hour tutorials cover anything from brainstorming and paragraph organization to grammar and reading skills. The UWC provides APA style instruction and support for the university as well. Faculty contribute assignments and syllabi, which are used to help guide their students when they visit. In addition, the director conducts in-class workshops on writing issues specific to the various disciplines.

The UWC is not the only program hosted by the Stone Lodge. The Center for Writing Excellence also includes other student-oriented programs not directly pertaining to any specific course. Harkening back to its purpose as a student group meeting site, the CWE hosts student-organized Reading and Writing Groups, which can be started by any UNA student. These groups have standing appointments to meet at the Center to discuss and write on literary topics of their own choosing. In addition, the CWE director coordinates the Academic-Athletic Mentoring Program (AAMP), which provides qualified student mentors who encourage student-athletes to establish and achieve academic goals. The program includes lessons in time and resource management and study skills.

In the past, lodge events and student activities fostered community relationships and raised awareness. Today, the CWE takes its message about the pleasure of writing and literacy into the community in two distinct programs. The CWE helped start and provides continued training for the Florence High School Writing Center, a lunchtime tutorial support service directed by a high school faculty member and operated by peer tutors. The CWE also works with the Florence-Lauderdale Public Library to offer community writing workshops that meet at least six times on a weekly or biweekly basis each

semester. The first was a memoir writing workshop, followed by a fiction workshop for new writers. For the summer, the writing workshop is directed to a high school-aged audience. Finally, modern composition and education scholarship, like the works of Patricia Bizzell and Lev Vygotsky, shows that writing and learning are social processes, so the CWE encourages students to make the lodge an academic hangout, through a casual meeting and reading area, a board for public comments, and a word of the day feature. While the late President Keller might have frowned upon Leo’s Stone Lodge as a social hangout, the CWE attempts to bridge the gap between academic and social identities.



UNA Writing Center Tutors



UNA Center for Writing Excellence

### Into the Future...

The Stone Lodge has been a catch-all over the years, housing a variety of activities and organizations. In the process, it has come to reflect all of the diversity and many different interests of UNA students. Though all its uses, alumni and students continue to share fond memories of the place. It is the hope of all those involved in the CWE that students continue to have fond memories of the lodge, the activities, and the programs housed there.

But who knows what the future brings? In the face of state budget cuts and long-range planning, no one can assume the UNA Center for Writing Excellence will always be housed in the Stone Lodge. Of course, none of its prior occupants could

make this assumption either. What is left is history: the record of the CWE contribution to UNA, its place in the lodge’s timeline, and the work it does to make students’ lives better. The Center helps students and community members develop their writing skills, and it encourages them to take pleasure in creating, defining, and presenting their ideas. These purposes echo the words of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, whose portrait hangs above the lodge mantel, and whose recovery programs led to the lodge’s construction: “Happiness... lies in the joy of achievement, in the thrill of creative effort.” ✨

written by students negotiating what they perceive as a formal and stiff discourse community. She is soon discussing health, the death of her aunt, and the theft of her aunt's hat before concluding, "Them 'as pinched it done her in."

Freddy Eynsford-Hill, clearly smitten with Eliza, giggles conspicuously at her word choice and syntax. When Eliza, holding to her necessarily forced formality, asks about his giggling, he claims that, "It's the new small talk. You do it so awfully well." And Eliza responds, "Well, if I was doing it proper, what was you sniggerin' at? Have I said anything I outghtn't?"

Eliza's response reflects some of the discomfort she feels in the situation, a situation that drags her into an arena of pompous formality. She's more interested in whether or not her response was "proper" than whether or not it represented her accurately. In writing center terms, I enjoy how this scene captures the difficulty many students have in mediating a sense of "propriety" while maintaining an individual "voice."

Of course, it's important to allow for multiple literacies, but too often in academia we do so from a comfortable distance created by the traditional classroom structure. The writing center is where these literacies converge, not unlike Henry Higgins' sitting room or, less comfortably, during Opening Day at Ascot. In the writing center, talk and interpersonal relationships are the capital of learning. Further, though, when we discuss "multiple literacies," it seems to me we need to consider the role gender, class, race, and culture play in negotiating those differences. Literacy, after all, is as much a social and political entity as it is an educational goal. From such a perspective, *My Fair Lady* can provide a fruitful discussion of multiple literacies in the context of class and gender. (For example, Eliza's last name and Henry's initial treatment of her are obvious points of discussion.) Eliza's father, Alfred Doolittle, is especially worth a look.

I should note that *My Fair Lady* is almost three hours long and, for practical matters, perhaps best handled in pieces. Of course, the "Pygmalion theme" is common among pop culture representations of teaching and learning, and I will spend a future column or two looking at similar "Pygmalion" movies and considering how they might inform writing center work. ✨

#### "What's the Point?" continued from page 10

Again, we have no grammar or punctuation problems here, not even any spelling problems. But the mistake is in the logic: how can one have children and not know it? Furthermore, this church nursery must be always empty because it exists only for those who have children and don't know it. I suppose those who have children and know it must leave their children at home. So there can't be any children in this nursery: those who have children and don't know it would not know that they needed a nursery, although the nursery only exists for them!

Here's one that could have been prevented by a hyphen and a correct pronoun:

"The ladies of the church have cast off clothing of every kind. They may be seen in the basement on Friday afternoon."

Put a hyphen between "cast" and "clothing," and change the pronoun "they" to "it," and this one becomes correct. And boring.

So let's enjoy the majestic ingenuity of these quotations and leave them alone to bask in imperfection and beauty. I would not change a thing. I hope you wouldn't, either. To do so would violate Ruskin's idea of beauty and creativity, which I definitely admire, both because of Ruskin's insight about the necessity for imperfection and in the church bulletins' use of it. And if I were to ask myself if I should correct these ingenious works, make them more precise, I think that eventually I would have to ask, what's the point? ✨

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