

1-1-1996

Review of Internet Resources for Writing Centers

S. Erin Denney

Matthew J. Livesey

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/wcj>

Recommended Citation

Denney, S. Erin and Livesey, Matthew J. (1996) "Review of Internet Resources for Writing Centers," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 2, Article 7.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1355>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries.
Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

Review of Internet Resources for Writing Centers

S. Erin Denney and Matthew J. Livesey

Helping writers avoid clichés and overused phrases is not the most important aspect of teaching writing, but writing center staffs across the country are likely growing weary of encountering such expressions as “information superhighway” and “Internet presence” in the papers they read. However, these already tired phrases represent an important opportunity that every writing center should consider; through the technologies now commonly available on most campuses, writing centers can reach larger numbers of people and reach them more efficiently than ever before.

Having been involved in constructing the University of Wisconsin-Madison’s Online Writing Center (<http://www.wisc.edu/writing/>) for the past year, we have spent considerable time and energy both researching the work of pioneering writing centers and creating resources of our own. This review reflects our assessment of three online venues where writing centers have established a presence: Gopher, the World Wide Web, and MOOs.

Gopher

As is commonly the case in things virtual, Gopher, the primary technology for Internet information delivery only two years ago, is today considered antiquated. However, because of its reliance on plain-text content, Gopher software is still more widely available and more widely supported than WWW software, and many campuses still use Gopher as the basis of their campus-wide information system. This makes it a good starting-point for writing centers just beginning to provide Internet resources.

The Writing Center Journal, Volume 16, Number 2, Spring 1996

Gopher servers present information in hierarchical directories, most often with a simple point-and-click interface. From the top-level directory (most often the campus-wide level) users make choices from successive menus depending on the kind of information they seek. A writing center wishing to make resources available through their campus Gopher server will most likely simply need to develop a directory structure for their information and then provide plain-text files to the person or department that manages the server.

Gopher directories often contain “pointers” to resources located on other Gopher servers. A writing center lacking instructional materials of its own to put on a Gopher server might like to offer its users the chance to browse the materials that other writing centers have put on theirs. This can be accomplished by including a directory item that takes users to other sites. (Before doing so, it’s customary to ask permission from the other centers involved.)

Because Gopher was one of the original technologies for supplying information over the Internet, most writing center Gopher sites are limited to local information. Such sites can be located with a “Veronica” search (available on the menus of most Gopher servers). A search for *writing and lab* or *writing and center* should yield a good cross-section of available Gopher resources provided by writing centers.

Although most Gopher writing center sites are limited to local resources, two provide substantial global information. It is a tribute to the hard work of Purdue’s Online Writing Lab (OWL) and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign’s Writer’s Workshop that many other writing center Gopher sites simply point to their sites instead of offering materials of their own.

Purdue

<gopher://owl.trc.purdue.edu:70/1>

Although all their information is available on the World Wide Web, Purdue’s OWL also maintains a Gopher site that offers their full range of instructional materials. These materials cover such issues as grammar, punctuation, and style, as well as planning, organizing, and drafting papers.

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

<gopher://gopher.uiuc.edu:70/11/Libraries/writers>

The Writer’s Workshop at UIUC limits itself to three kinds of information via Gopher: guides to documentation styles, a range of grammar handouts, and a selection of materials about writing techniques. There’s good coverage of APA and MLA styles (and “old” MLA, for those feeling nostalgic for footnotes), as well as many other topics important to college-level writers.

Temple University

[gopher://astro.ocis.temple.edu:70/11/writing_ctr](http://astro.ocis.temple.edu:70/11/writing_ctr)

In addition to a range of instructional materials for students, Temple also includes handouts for faculty. Topics such as “Intervening in Students’ Writing” and a “Summary Checklist for Commentary” help teachers give meaningful writing assistance to their students. Resources for instructors are not often included in the materials that writing centers make available on the Internet, but they can make a vital contribution to writing instruction.

World Wide Web

The World Wide Web (WWW, or “the Web”) is the current hot technology on the Internet. When people speak of “surfing the net,” the Web is most likely what they mean. The reason for the Web’s prominence becomes clear as soon as one launches Web software (called a browser) the first time. Instead of the text-only interface of Gopher, the Web presents photos and illustrations, text of different sizes and colors, even sound and video.

The WWW provides an ideal method of transmitting information both globally and locally. Whereas Gopher is limited to a menu structure, the Web’s use of hypertext links, both between documents and between different parts of documents, allows material to be structured in multiple ways. Because it is not limited to ASCII characters, the Web also allows much more complex formatting of documents than does Gopher. This can be especially important in issues of writing, where format, underlining, italics, and other things Gopher cannot do are often important. Formatting of documents can also affect their clarity and effectiveness. The variety of type size, colors, and even graphics and pictures helps the Web function as an effective tool for teaching writing.

Though the Web can clearly be an effective local tool, the ease with which links can join sites around the globe emphasizes its real capabilities. Individual sites can enrich themselves by linking to other sites with more or different information. Learning can be shared and, thus, intensified. It is in providing services to all, not just to members of one local group, that the World Wide Web is at its best and most effective.

Because one of the primary advantages of the WWW over Gopher is the ease and abundance of links to other sites, it is often most profitable to conduct a search for a particular kind of Web site by looking at similar Web sites and seeing what links they provide. The Web OWLs we examined were found in just this manner. We began by connecting to Purdue University and the University of Maine’s OWLs, both of which have excellent and lengthy lists of other OWLs. Some of these other OWLs had links to still other OWLs and so on. All in all, we found a total of fifty-eight OWLs on the Web.

Two of these sites were unavailable due to the fact that they were under construction, and we failed to establish a connection with six of the others. In the end, we were able to examine fifty Web OWLs.

Of these fifty, twenty included only local information, e.g., the hours and locations of their face-to-face writing centers, a list of services, or information about classes offered at the center. Most of the local-information OWLs are text-oriented and have no links. Those which do make use of the hypertextual environment do so in a fairly basic manner, probably because of the limited information they provide.

We found thirty Web OWLs providing information of global interest, such as writing handouts (with information on issues ranging from punctuation to organization), links to research and reference resources (including everything from dictionaries and thesauri to search tools and directories), teaching resources, lists of other OWLs, invitations to answer questions and comment on papers via e-mail, and invitations for real-time conversation via MOOs. Web OWLs have a wide variety of strengths; some of the most impressive and distinctive sites are listed here.

Purdue University's On-Line Writing Lab

<http://owl.trc.purdue.edu/>

The strength of Purdue University's On-Line Writing Lab is its massive number of handouts and research links. Nearly every other OWL contains links to all or part of Purdue's enormous database. Purdue's handouts are lengthy and detailed, and many contain exercises, sample sentences, and papers. Many OWLs, instead of writing their own handouts, simply link to the ones at Purdue. Purdue's handouts can be searched in three different formats: by a summary of the general category, by an outline of the general category, and by a list of the document titles. The multiple-approach method is especially advantageous in allowing users to choose the method which best approaches their learning style or their particular question. This multifaceted way of approaching information is one of the key advantages of the hypertextual Web and one of its advantages over Gopher.

But Purdue's handouts are only one of its strengths. It also has extensive research links in writing and in numerous other fields. Though many other OWLs also contain such research links, as with its handouts, Purdue's links are generally the most extensive. The writing research links include indexes and references for writers, guides to style and editing, business and technical writing links, children and writing links, and links to professional organizations. The non-writing research information includes links in such fields as arts and literature, science, engineering and technology, government information, and social science. Purdue's OWL also includes search tools and links to general indexes, reference resources, science and technology directories, government information, educational resources, and other OWLs.

The University of Maine's Writing Center Online

<http://www.ume.maine.edu/~wcenter/>

The University of Maine's list of other OWLs is unrivaled. Under their link to Purdue University's On-Line Writing Lab is the statement, "When our Writing Center Online grows up, we hope it's as nice as Purdue's OWL." Certainly they have accomplished this many times over with respect to their listing of other OWLs. Including links to approximately ninety different OWLs (both Gopher and Web-based), Maine far outshines the competition, almost none of which, including Purdue, exceeds thirty links. The links are alphabetized by institution, and brief annotations are given for those links providing information of global interest. The Writing Center Online also contains some research resources not found at Purdue, such as foreign language dictionaries, ESL resources, computer and rhetoric resources, computer-mediated communication resources, and tips for researching.

Maine's local information is also particularly interesting, providing a highly friendly and accessible environment for learning about face-to-face tutoring. This information includes a link providing biographical information on the tutors, which enhances the friendly atmosphere of the Writing Center, and an attractive and easy-to-read graph of the tutor's available hours. This graph lists tutor's names in a variety of colors depending on their experience. The WCO's local information also contains a list of the kinds of help students can find at the Writing Center and a description of the Center's goals. The WCO's information stresses the authority of students both in their writing and in their tutoring sessions. Though it was not functioning at the time of this writing, a description of a real tutoring session is also offered and would no doubt help to familiarize students with the tutoring process. In the future, Maine's Writing Center intends to provide help via e-mail and an online real-time environment (most likely a MOO or similar environment).

The University of Missouri's Online Writery

<http://www.missouri.edu/~wleric/writery.html>

The University of Missouri's Online Writery is much more technologically oriented than either Purdue or Maine and has already accomplished Maine's goal of providing help through both e-mail and a MOO. The Writery is best known for its combination of e-mail and online, real-time instruction, which is restricted to Missouri students, faculty, and staff. However, researchers studying writing centers can arrange access to the Writery's MOO (on Missouri's private ZooMOO) in order to observe its functioning (the Web site provides instructions). The Writery also contains the most thorough information available about technology and writing, including information about MOOs, the favored form of online, real-time

instruction.

The Writery's home page is engaging and artfully designed with a clear menu of choices: "email," "realtime," "newz," "f2f" (including brief information on their local, face-to-face tutoring), and "writery resources." The "email" link leads to two methods of sending in writing questions, a mail-to address and a Web form, and to a promise that a response will be given within one hour if the e-mail is received during "business" hours. The "real time" link leads to an abundance of information about MOOs—their history, various MOO commands, and how to gain access to and communicate in a MOO. There are also numerous MOO-related links: to other MOOs, to MOO Web pages, and to articles about MOOS. The Writery's "newz" link contains lists of and links to writing newsgroups. The "writery resources" link leads not only to the common writing resources, but also, continuing Missouri's technological emphasis, to numerous resources on computers and education, and computers and networks (including detailed information on various aspects of the Internet, from an HTML tutorial to a file on netiquette). The "writery resources" also contain the entertaining "gallery," to which anyone can submit essays, poetry, drawings, etc. The "gallery" even accepts "notes to yourself" and "graffiti on the sidewalk."

Michigan Technological University's Writing Center

<http://www.hu.mtu.edu/wc/welcome.html>

Along with the University of Missouri's Online Writery, Michigan Tech's Writing Center is one of the more artfully designed and friendly OWLs. Its home page is engaging and attractive, and it provides a clear menu of choices. Its local information creates a friendly atmosphere by including a list of the variety of writing issues they help with, thoughtful and glowing reviews from students who have visited the local Writing Center, and a list of types of people who use the local services. It also includes a staff directory of individual home pages with academic and personal information about each staff member and a detailed and annotated list of services offered.

Michigan Tech's OWL is also impressive in its highly detailed description and philosophy of its Writing Center and composition program, which argues for developing critical thinking, social interaction, and metacognitive capacity through reading and writing. In addition, Michigan Tech provides a useful explanation of how to navigate their site, including both basic information about Web pages and an explanation of their site's design. The explanation of the design of their site is unparalleled and helps the user both gain a better understanding of the Web in general and a better understanding of where to find specific information at Michigan Tech's site.

Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute's Writing Center

<http://www.rpi.edu/dept/llc/writecenter/web/home.html>

Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute's Writing Center contains original handouts, some of which are on technical subjects other OWLs do not address. These handouts—on electrical, computer, and systems engineering—are lengthy and detailed and often include a list of references. RPI's Writing Center also contains "Internet Resources for Technical Communicators," which has explanations of and links to electronic mailing lists, newsgroups, journals, magazines, and newsletters, all of which focus on issues of computers and writing. Another unique and useful feature is an alphabetically-arranged page with definitions of terminology likely to be encountered in RPI's Writing Center pages or, for that matter, in any Web page.

Trinity College's Writing Center

<http://www.trincoll.edu/writcent/aksmith.html>

Trinity College's Writing Center is exceptional in its links to sites where the full texts of books, newspapers, magazines, and radio programs can be found. The book links lead to special book exhibits and author/title searches of books to be found online, some of which are free. The links to magazines and newspapers include a self-created newspaper service called CRAYON, where the user can select areas of interest. Also, links are provided to local and worldwide student publications. Trinity's local information is highly detailed, including information on their writing program curriculum; tutoring and workshops for students; and workshops, training, and consulting for faculty and staff.

Dakota State University's Online Writing Lab

<http://www.dsu.edu/departments/liberal/owl/>

Dakota State University's Online Writing Lab is interesting in that it has no real-life component; it exists only online. Furthermore, DSU's OWL emphasizes that it works with faculty as well as students. Their Web site contains access to their e-mail address, which provides help to the global community, though DSU students are given priority. The Web site contains detailed instructions both on how to send a question and on how to ask questions to receive the most effective response, thus providing some early training for users in how to examine their own writing and think about writing problems. This site is also unique in that it includes the text of the grant which helped to fund the DSU OWL, links to other grant institutions, information about mini-grants given to faculty who wish to incorporate writing into their classes, and information about the staff and students who have used the OWL.

MOOs

Ironically, the form of Internet communication most like face-to-face instruction uses the oldest of Internet technologies. A Telnet client (a terminal emulator used to connect to other computers) connects users to a virtual conference room, where they can communicate directly and immediately with other people by typing messages and watching what others type. MOO (or MUD, MUSE, or MUSH) communication happens immediately, without the delay of e-mail.

Once connected to a MOO, the user is prompted with a menu of options. Members of the MOO can connect under their member name; guests usually are asked to type "connect guest," at which point they will be given a guest name and entered into the virtual environment. Guests always enter the environment in the same place, usually in or near an information room. Typing "help" brings up an informative help menu. More complete information about moving around, speaking, and manipulating objects can be found in any one of the numerous Web files about MOO commands (see the discussion of Missouri's Web site, above).

Several OWLs offer real-time online help through MOOs. On these writing-oriented MOOs, students, teachers, and researchers can meet, chat, tutor, and hold classes. MOOs are advantageous in that they allow for immediate responses, which e-mail does not. Students and teachers are able to interrupt, ask for explanations or clarifications, make brief statements, or pose questions and receive responses. The immediacy of MOOs helps make writing and learning more collaborative. In e-mail, where the number of communications is limited and so more information must be packed into each one, respondents have to fight the impulse to lecture, and at the same time have to work hard to make sure a point will be understandable. In a MOO, collaborative teaching is more natural, as the writer's responses and level of comprehension can be taken into account more readily.

The best sources of writing and academically oriented MOOs can be found through links at the University of Missouri's Writery (see section in Web sites, above, for Missouri's URL). The MOOs we found were all linked to resources located at various Web sites. Altogether, we found fourteen MOOs emphasizing writing as one of their main concerns. Of these, only two were completely private, allowing no guest access at all. The others differed as to what services they would provide guests, but guests were allowed at least to log on, explore the MOO, and talk with others.

Many MOOs contain space for teachers to bring classes, and most of these are not restricted to users at the site's university. These MOOs often contain information about how to teach on a MOO. Fewer provide online tutoring, and so far none of this help is open to the general public. Since MOOs are a largely social environment, the busy ones are also the most useful

and enjoyable. The following MOOs are some of the most impressive due to their useful writing environments (classes and tutoring), information about MOOs and teaching, and number of users.

DaedalusMOO

telnet://logos.daedalus.com:7777

Web site: <http://www.daedalus.com>

DaedalusMOO dedicates itself to writing in electronic spaces and is particularly committed to the Daedalus Integrated Writing Environment (DIWE) software. Teachers can apply for space to bring their classes to DaedalusMOO, though teachers at institutions which are official DIWE sites are given top priority. At the DaedalusMOO Information Booth, just west of the first room guests find themselves in, can be found information on DaedalusMOO's purpose, applying for characters, teaching at DaedalusMOO, and plenty of tips for teaching on MOOs in general. DaedalusMOO's Web site contains information on DIWE software, information on MOOs (including tips for teaching on a MOO), and a link to the Alliance for Computers and Writing Web site.

DaedalusMOO provides space for The University of Arkansas at Little Rock and Roan State Community College's Writing Works (DaedalusMOO also provides space for Missouri's Writery; however, it wasn't staffed when we visited). To reach the Writing Works, type "@go writing." The Writing Works does not offer writing help to the general public; however, interesting information about the Writing Works can be found there, and staff members are friendly when not busy. Further information about the Writing Works can be found at their Web site (<http://fur.rsc.ccc.tn.us/cyberproject.html>).

Diversity University

telnet://moo.du.org:8888

Web site: <http://www.du.org/>

Diversity University is dedicated to interactive teaching and learning. Like DaedalusMOO, they offer space for teachers to bring their classes. Distance education courses are also offered at DU through the Globewide Network Academy. Their prototype English Resource Center (type "@go #9893") contains information on teaching methodology, tools, types of classrooms, and differences inherent in teaching on a MOO. This Center also contains information on creating projects in class and on MOO pedagogy. Further information about teaching at DU can be found at "@go MOOteach." DU's Web site contains a link to the Composition in Cyberspace project, which includes course materials, research materials, and MOO help sheets.

MediaMOO

telnet://purple-crayon.media.mit.edu:8888

Web site: <http://asb.www.media.mit.edu/people/asb/MediaMOO>

Unlike DaedalusMOO and Diversity University, MediaMOO discourages classes. Instead, MediaMOO is a place for media researchers to gather and talk. The Netoric Project, which is dedicated to computers and writing, is centered here. Netoric Headquarters (type “@go Netoric”) contains a listing of Netoric documents available via e-mail and a listing of upcoming Netoric events. Every Tuesday night at 8:00 p.m. (EST) the Netoric Project sponsors an open gathering of people interested and involved in computers and writing (type “@go Tuesday”). MediaMOO’s Web site contains membership information, MediaMOO’s purpose statements, and a link to the Netoric Web pages.

MOOs are the least common technology explored by OWLs. Very few writing centers have branched out to MOOs, perhaps because of their lingering association with online games. However, the ability to communicate with students in real time offers an advantage over the much slower e-mail. Though currently OWL MOOs do not offer tutoring to a global community, this is, ideally, their future, as their strength lies in enabling many people from all over the world to log on to the same site and talk.

Concluding Thoughts

As we found in working on the University of Wisconsin-Madison’s Online Writing Center (see the introduction for our URL), in planning and implementing an OWL a writing center needs to do several things. First, it needs to consider its goals: whether it wants to reach a local or global population; whether it wants to use static, semi-interactive, and/or fully interactive methods of teaching; and, if fully interactive, whether it wants to function in a delayed or real-time environment. Writing center staff should also browse some available sites to determine what’s already out there. Many of the people in charge of OWLs are more than happy to advise others in their planning and implementation. Finally, although more writing centers join the online community every month, doing so takes a commitment of certain resources to the planning, implementation, and maintenance of online information. But at a time when shrinking budgets demand that writing centers do more with less, going online can be a way to extend your reach, raise your visibility, and help more writers than ever before.

S. Erin Denney is a doctoral candidate at the University of Wisconsin-Madison who is interested in the pedagogical uses of computer technology. She is currently working on the Writing Center's online project and writing a dissertation on the use of magic realism by marginalized authors.

Matthew J. Livesey is a doctoral candidate at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where, in addition to his work on the Writing Center's online project, he oversees its computer lab. He is writing a dissertation on the origins of the gay novel in America.