

## **Intro**

As Writing Center Tutors, we are told endlessly that our focus should be on the writer and less on the writing. We are to ensure that once the student leaves the desk, they feel comfortable and competent enough to carry what they've learned into any writing assignment they are faced with. But how well are we making sure that the writers walk away with a voice that is fully their own, rather than one that simply ensures advancement within a system that typically favors a certain type of rhetoric?

While the Writing Center is independent from regular academics of the school in the sense that tutors are not professors who grade essays, it is impossible to say that the Writing Center is entirely separated from the institution of education. Although we do serve the students and not their professors, students often come to us in need of advice in order to give their professor something deemed acceptable, and some professors even require visits to the Writing Center as part of their essay assignments. As much as tutors want to help the writer in the long run, many students simply desire a quick fix that will get them the A. The Writing Center's close proximity to the grading process dictates that it is part of the college institution as a whole, and therefore can contribute to any institutional trends, norms, and biases that may come with it.

A topic that has been discussed frequently in college institutions today is the presence of institutional racism in academia, and how to close the achievement gap between black and white students. According to Greenfield and Rowan, there is a new type of racism that is present in college institutions, and "the 'new racism' ...is deeply entrenched in our discourses about language" (34). In this discussion, we will specifically be addressing the Writing Center's role in the promotion of institutional racism and how to better assist students of color in advancing through academia who may not want to submit to the dominant rhetoric: Standard Written English.

### **Protest Rhetoric:**

If SWE is meant for a formal, academic, and reserved setting, protest rhetoric can be put in direct opposition to it. Protest itself can be defined by Jones as such: "Protest works to remind the public that democracy should be a tool for constant change according to the changing needs of and requirements of what it means to be free and equal" (Jones 18). In order to enact that

change, the language used must be passionate, emotional, and striking to the reader or listener. Protest is about standing in opposition to the institution in place, and therefore protest rhetoric stands in opposition to the typically accepted form of language.

We would like to focus specifically on the role that black protest rhetoric plays in today's society, and the public's reaction to it. What happens often, and what seems to have happened on our own campus, is people's judgement of protest rhetoric stems from a deeply seeded objection to the person it's coming from. Greenfield and Rowan once again articulate this relationship of prejudice. "It is not the language which causes listeners to make assumptions about the speaker, but the attitudes held by the listeners towards the speaker that cause them to extend that attitude towards the speakers language" (50). It is far more socially acceptable to say that you have a problem with the way something was said, rather than saying you have an objective to the argument on the whole, or even to the person themselves. This happens frequently in discussions concerning social justice, and it allows for the continuance of racial biases in everyday conversations and debates. We had the ability to witness these cryptic and racialized critiques in person last spring.

### **Standard Written English**

Standard Written English is generally thought of as academic language comprising the syntax, grammar, and diction deemed "acceptable" in university-level papers. For the purposes of this presentation we can think of it as one of many dialects people are brought up speaking and writing, specifically the one dialect that is standardized and used in the education process as the model of what "good writing" looks like. The particular dialect of SWE is primarily the language of upper and middle class white families. The intersection of these definitions is wherein lies the problem; its exclusivism can serve to reaffirm racial hierarchies in institutions and society at large. This is not explicit; that is to say Standard Written English is not in and of itself racist. However, because Standard Written English is often the only acceptable form of academic language, those who have been brought up using it, that is generally white people, are given access to the legitimacy and power it affords while people of color are not. Laura

Greenfield and Karen Rowan's book *Writing Centers and the New Racism : a Call for Sustainable Dialogue and Change* articulates this more completely saying, "What it does mean is that excluding languages that people of color historically have used as tools of resistance and automatically including languages spoken by privileged white people in the realm of what counts as 'Standard English' necessarily creates a system of inequality in which many people of color are expected to be bidialectal or bilingual as a condition for being taken seriously as communicators whereas privileged white people- regardless of their actual speech- *always* *always* speak a language of power" (43). This goes beyond simply speaking about Standard Written English and diagnoses this standardization of language as one symptom of the larger disease of racism that privileges some voices over others based solely on the color of their skin. Because of the cultural and ethnic implications of language a system that holds one dialect above all others also holds up its cultural and ethical roots. This is to say that the current exclusivism of Standard Written English would place a poorly written paper in that dialect above the really well written paper in a different one.

This is something that needs to be addressed and changed not only because it does serve to reaffirm the racial hierarchy present in the US, but because as it stands now fluency in standard written english is the sole way to "write well" in the eyes of academia and to access all the doors that SWE opens. Those who are not fluent, namely international writers and some people of color, are not seen as as effective writers or communicators as those who are. . It is yet another way to delegitimize the voices of the oppressed. It is unfair to simply expect that upon arriving at college someone must automatically become bilingual. We cannot simply say that in order to be taken seriously you must speak and write like a white person. This, when put in effect, is a racist ideology. But as it exists now, fluency in Standard Written English is a means to academic and political power that needs to be accessed, especially for these marginalized groups. **So how can we as a writing center still give people of color access to this power without delegitimizing their own native dialect?** This is a difficult question, one made more so by the presupposed purposes of Standard Written English in Academic Institutions.

To answer it we must look at the benefits of this institution of language. Firstly, having a standardized dialect unifies academia. It prevents us from "talking past each other" so to speak.

If everyone uses the same dialect it is easy to pick out the main argument of any given paper. Standard Written English is also a common ground for evaluating differences in writing. If we all have the same base line and same standards for exceptional writing it becomes simpler to compare and evaluate papers on equal footing . These are valid praises for Standard Written English, but when viewed in relation to protest rhetoric these simply do not apply because protest rhetoric, by definition, is meant to work outside of standardization. Jones's, in his dissertation *vision of consequence: The discourse of protest*, gives a description of protest rhetoric: it is rooted in the experience and identity of the protester which makes the rhetoric both material and embodied • relies on a consideration of the consequences of language • attempts to merge the mind/body and public/ private divides • struggles with challenging the existence of systems of belief (Le. ideologies) while trying to avoid creating a replacement system through its rhetoric “ (Jones 30).

As a writing center intent on embracing all dialects, especially protest rhetoric we must shed the flawed assumption that language, and more concretely the writing center itself, occupies an apolitical space. This kind of rhetoric doesn't just speak about political issues but is in itself political, especially in a society and a field of academia that often attempts to silence black and brown voices. So what are the implications of the writing center as a political entity? For one thing, this means that the writing center can be a place to really institute the values colleges profess. We know that change most of the time comes on the back of language, and as tutors we continuously remind writers that their writing is perhaps the most effective way to express their beliefs. This is not to say that the Writing Center is to evaluate political ideologies but that in a recognition of different dialects, and especially with training to address protest rhetoric's unique linguistic necessities, we can be tools to enable all voices to be heard equally.

This is especially important when we look at the environment and time the writing center exists in. According to Hudlin Wagner in her article *The Revolution on Americas Campuses: what do Protesters Want*, “The share of students who said there was a “very good chance” they would participate in a protest while enrolled rose to 8.5 percent nationwide from 5.6 percent in 2014. (Among black students, the share climbed from 10.5 percent to a full 16 percent.) These figures were the highest the survey had recorded since it began in 1967—encompassing the eras of the military draft, the Kent State shootings, the anti-apartheid movement and the protests

against the war in Iraq.” We have seen protests such as those that erupted on the Berkley Campus last year condemned for its hostility and unwillingness to uphold the ideals of academic freedom. We know that protest is quickly become one of the most effective forms of resistance, so as a writing center we can know two things: first, that it is improbable and irresponsible for us to assume we do not a place in this movement being that it is one so deeply connected to language, and second that good argumentation, especially in writing has a hard time holding offensive or hateful sentiments effectively, and must address counter arguments as well. We are taught this in training, that when dealing with a sensitive paper topic it is often more effective to comment on the holes in argument than the topic itself. What is missing from this is a distinction between argumentation that rests on ignorance and vitriolic language, and that that rests on passion and a desire to change the status quo. In fully explaining this distinction we can begin to open up a place for protest rhetoric in the writing center.

**Case Study:** At our institution, St. Olaf college, a series of racial threats and discussions led to a school-wide day of protest on May 1st, 2017 in which a student group, the Collective for Change on the Hill, composed a Terms of Engagement and List of Demands, and presented them to the President and his Leadership Team. Their goal: “Our mission is to hold the administration and students of St. Olaf College accountable for the institutionalized racism that is embedded within the structures of this campus. We aim that St. Olaf College will recognize that these racially charged reported and unreported hate crimes are not driven by individual incidents or students, but an ideology that is continuously supported by the administration’s lack of action and the student body’s harmful attitudes.” Before presenting these documents to the President, the Collective gave students the opportunity to suggest edits and changes. On the day of the protest, some students and the administration objected to the rhetoric used and felt that it was either too harsh and demanding, or that it didn’t entirely represent everyone accurately. Most of the PLT’s objections had to do with the emotional rhetoric used and the harshness of the demands (words like “must”). The document went back and forth between the Collective making edits and the PLT adding more critiques, and eventually the President signed the Terms of Engagement agreeing to further examine and discuss the List of Demands.

**Autobiographical:**

The days leading up to the full day of protest were tense, but also filled with important conversations about race that the campus deeply needed. The professors in almost all of my classes allowed us time to discuss the presence of institutional racism at St. Olaf, and how the administration and curriculum could better support students of color. I remember trying to grapple with all my identities at once; as an adopted Chinese American, as a first year student still figuring out the ins and outs of the school, and now as a newly hired writing tutor.

While these events were happening, we were in the process of being trained for the Writing Center. We attended weekly sessions that prepared us for various writing scenarios, and they also forced us to look at writing in a way we never had before. Our training planned for May 1st happened to be about the pros and cons of Standard Written English, but it was canceled due to the schoolwide protest. Instead, we were all encouraged to attend the day's events to witness firsthand the power structures embedded within language.

I was lucky enough to be in the room where it all happened, and to watch the complex and problematic interaction between the Collective and the President's Leadership Team unfold throughout the day. One of the first critiques the College Administration had against the Collective's document was their use of the phrase "Terms of Engagement," as it seemed too militaristic for a formal document. As they went on, the Administration challenged many of the deadlines that the Collective demanded for certain plans of action, as well as "harsh" language such as "must." I remember sitting there and thinking about how trivial these edits seemed to be, and how time was slipping away for the sake of small-order changes to be made. It was then that I identified as a writing tutor for the first time, and I clearly saw the power dynamic ingrained in language; the President's Leadership Team, which consists 90% of white administrators, had the privilege and the power to deem the Collective's document, written by a group entirely made up of black and brown students, as unacceptable until they saw fit, or rather until they changed the document to meet their needs.

**Tone Policing:**

What we witnessed on our campus seemed to be a debate about the existence of institutional racism or racial microaggressions, but in reality it was a debate about how to reasonably present the argument. The events on May 1st illustrated a textbook example of what tone policing looks like in everyday life. Tone policing can be defined as a type of criticism that is given to an oppressed party from a party in power, and that focuses on the way things are expressed and their “tone” rather than the argument itself. Tone policing is a response to protest rhetoric and it is a means to disavow emotion and justified anger often coming from black and brown voices. The President rejected the original List because the rhetoric was not fit for a “formal document” and therefore could not be signed into effect, even though the administration agreed that institutional racism must be addressed at a more serious level than it has been in the past. It is common for the people in power to use coded language to imply that the type of rhetoric people of color use is not acceptable in today’s society. Considering the power of language, stereotypes about racial status and the ability of institutions to hide racist motivations behind “good academic language” allows tone policing to be used as a means to devalue and undermine the work of people of color.

As previously discussed, the Writing Center contributes to the systems in power and should be equally held responsible for keeping those systems in place. Since tone policing is a subtle form of racism and can fly under the radar if not careful, tutors must be fully aware of the type of critiques we give, and we must constantly assess whether we are sending a message that promotes inclusivity or one that promotes the status quo. We realize that this is a difficult feat, and one that requires constant work and attention. We also acknowledge that tutors are also raised within a system that prefers SWE, and that tutors are very possibly trained in a way that requires them to abide by the rules of SWE. In order to fairly and effectively address this issue at its source, Writing Center as a whole, including their supervisors, must allow for alternative dialects and voices to be validated.

## **Conclusion**

So, we are left with the question of exactly what we as a writing center can do. What we've described today has outlined many of the existing problems with how we work with students, especially students of color. In order to make any lasting change, our efforts must turn more broadly, to how our home institutions and academia as a whole propagate the exclusivism of Standard Written English. Perhaps this means speaking with professors about what kinds of languages they accept in their classrooms and what implicit forces are at work there. Perhaps it is speaking with the administration to add course material that is not written in standard written english. But as a writing center we act perhaps as the most personal and broad instruments for this kind of change. We must train tutors to recognize and validate good writing from all dialects and advocate for all writers to write the best they can in the ways they feel most comfortable doing. So, it's not just Standard Written English that has a place at the Writing Center but, maybe even more so, protest rhetoric and all other dialects as well. Of course this is not just a problem for the Writing Center. With language permeating virtually every facet of higher level education, it would be easy to just say that none of this matters if the very language we tutors attempt to validate is disregarded by professors, review boards, or researchers. However, the Writing Center has always functioned, not as a place for quick fixes, but as a way for students to learn how to take pride in their own writing and work to make it more proficient and authentic to their voice. Following that same tradition, we must remember that the Writing Center is ultimately a resource for students, and our responsibility lies with them, providing tutors with a unique opportunity to be the voice of acknowledgement and praise to home dialects without bearing the brunt of academic norms.

Overall, we must address the fact that ultimately there are no easy solutions for this problem. This is an institutional problem that requires systematic changes to the way we teach and think about language. An article by Taiyon Coleman on her experience as the sole black woman in her creative writing graduate program details the numerous microaggressions she encountered there. Namely, a professor telling her that she would never get published with the black rhetoric present in her stories. Of course, this turned out to be false as she did indeed get published, but this shows the tangible consequences/roadblocks/barriers that writers of color face in academia. We see the first step to changing this environment is awareness, especially insofar



as the writing desk has a place to shape institutional language. Being aware of our role to validate the voices that are brave enough to speak in opposition to SWE, especially in the form of protest rhetoric, can help encourage others to do the same, and ultimately the more voices in the dialogue the better. When tutors can validate their students' voices, while also attempting to make it accessible to cross-cultural audiences, what we're really doing is giving writers confidence to go and advocate for themselves.

## Meeting Notes

- For Case Study
  - Autobiographical: how I felt as a Writing Tutor, how it made me uncomfortable, identity as a tutor (both of us)
  - In the midst of tutor training, even had to cancel a training session about social justice in the writing center)
  - Brand new tutors
- Writing Center instead of Writing Desk
- Tutor reflection

- 20 minutes