

## Appendix 4

### Sample Reports from RLF Writing Fellows and Partner Institutions, Year 2004/05

#### A Fellow's Report to Staff

Thanks are due to the English Department for providing me with a teaching experience that has been productive and pleasing. I enjoyed being part of such a dynamic department. I appreciated the welcome that came from colleagues. Most of all, I was delighted to have the opportunity to work with lively and interesting students.

#### The RLF Scheme

The experience, for me, fully confirmed the worth of the Royal Literary Fund Writing Fellowship Scheme. For many students, the one to one consultations seemed to offer a haven where they could air uncertainties that they didn't dare admit in front of their tutors or fellow students. Some of the most powerful examples of this came near the beginning of the year, when several undergraduates brought me details of assignments and said: 'I have no idea what he (or she) is talking about.' The assignment was in most cases perfectly intelligible, and after only a few minutes' discussion students realised this. Their initial anxieties were paralysing; once they had dealt with them in a safe setting, they felt ready to launch out on their own. Students' reluctance to approach their lecturers in cases such as this is an almost inevitable consequence of the fact that lecturers are required to be assessors and enforcers of the academic rules as well as educators. The RLF Fellow is in the privileged position of being able to offer advice and guidance from outside the system, as it were.

Another strength of the Fellowship Scheme is that it allows students who need extended help to come back and back again without feeling that they are making too many demands on a lecturer who has other calls on his or her time. I emphasised that students could see me as often as they needed in order to progress; this made it possible, say, to use one tutorial to read a student's work and identify problems, a second session to work on basics like punctuation, a third to check whether they could put into practice what they'd learned, and a fourth to take up more general issues of coherence or style. Repetition and practice are important elements in acquiring a skill, and the Fellowship allowed me to spend as much individual time with students as was needed to help them develop as writers.

Good writing, and the ability to communicate effectively, is not often the object of formal instruction, and yet it is the foundation for most of the work that students do. Subtle thinking and subtle writing are inextricably linked. It intrigued me that so many students – including many of the more talented writers – failed to understand certain basics of good writing. Several had ruled out the idea of editing and redrafting; they had picked up the notion at school that good writers were the ones who scribbled a finished piece off at first go. Once they understood that all 'real' writers draft and re-draft, and that editing is crucial to well-shaped writing, they were able to do better work. Other students had never realised how important it is to articulate one's argument before setting out to write an essay. Demonstrating to students the value of deciding at an early stage 'what story you are going to tell' was more frequently helpful than any other piece of advice I had to offer.

#### Who I saw

I ran two essay writing workshops during the year, for students from the Public Services and the Working with Young People Foundation Degrees. The participants – nineteen students in all – seemed to benefit from the workshops, and there was positive feedback from tutors.

The rest of my teaching took the form of one to one tutorials. Over the year, I've had individual consultations with 107 different students, or five new students on average in each of the twenty-four teaching weeks. Fifty-four of these students returned for further sessions, bringing the total of tutorials over the year to 221, or an average of nine a week.

Over three-quarters (82/107) of the students who consulted me were women, and seventy per cent (75/107) were over the age of 21. I don't know whether this approximates to the gender and age profile of students in the relevant departments, but I suspect there may be a greater willingness on the part of older students to seek help. My impression was that mature students were more likely to use the Writing Fellow as part of a self-generated strategy aimed at producing the best work they could, while students under twenty-one more often saw visits to the Writing Fellow – triggered usually by a referral from a tutor – as a means of addressing an immediate and pressing weakness.

Undergraduates in their second year were the keenest in terms of attendance; freshers kept me busy as well, especially at the beginning of the year when many needed confidence-building. I also saw twenty-one third year undergraduates, many of whom wanted advice about dissertations, and seven postgraduates.

Most of the undergraduates who came to see me were studying English (or English with Drama or Creative Writing, or another combination) but I also saw students from Communication Studies, Film Studies, Sociology, Social Work, Art, Business Studies / Marketing and Women's Studies.

### **What we did**

The problems that students brought constituted an intriguing range. Many were experiencing difficulties with the process of essay writing, from interpreting the question to making a plan; some struggled with the basics of grammar and syntax, and others, with more sophisticated questions of argument and expression. Students not infrequently sought help on questions that had been dealt with in the meticulous essay writing guidelines produced by the department; I took this to mean that they often needed individual, face-to-face advice before a point would finally hit home.

Many students sought me out not because of technical problems with writing, but because lack of confidence was holding them back from doing their best. In some cases, something as simple as a careful reading of their work and an assurance that what they wrote wasn't 'stupid' was enough to free them up to concentrate on concrete improvements in technique.

It's worth saying, I think, that although one might occasionally become discouraged by contact with a student who seemed unable to make much headway, RLF teaching provides, on the whole, the best experience of teaching imaginable. (I say this as a former Professor of Sociology with twenty-seven years' experience of university teaching.) It was teaching with the bad bits – lecture preparation; grading; failing students; committee meetings – left out; teaching devoted to helping students to improve the quality of their work. Bliss!

### **Issues most often discussed:**

- What is an argument – and how is one produced?
- In what way should third year essays be superior to those produced in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year?
- What does the essay question mean?
- What's involved in editing?
- What is a sentence?
- How to introduce an essay. How to conclude.
- How to move from notes on reading to an essay plan.
- How to start writing an essay (instead of just thinking about it).
- How to know when an argument veers off the point. How to correct it.
- Basic punctuation – use of the comma, semi-colon, colon, apostrophe.
- How to integrate quotations into the body of an essay.
- How to structure material for a dissertation.

### **Recommendations**

Here are a handful of issues that occur to me as a result of the year's RLF teaching, and which the department might like to consider.

### **Reference material** (departmental guidelines, dissertation guidelines, study skills handouts, etc.):

The reference material at the institution aimed at preparing students for the intellectual challenges of studying for a degree is impressive in range and quality. However, there is one further handout or reference that might usefully be produced; that is, a booklet of exemplary academic writing. I saw many students in the course of the academic year whose work suffered from heavy-handed use of theoretical apparatus and from complicated, not to say convoluted, phrasing; I worked to persuade them that clarity should be their goal and that sophistication does not require obscurity. (The problem appeared often among second and third year undergraduates who were attempting to raise their game.) It seems to me that one of the reasons why students offer overly-complicated writing is because when tutors recommend reading for its intellectual content, students mistakenly assume that its stylistic achievements are being recommended as well. Hence, they take as their models of good writing the work of scholars whose contribution lies elsewhere. The antidote to this might be a booklet containing extracts that students know have been selected primarily for the lucidity and effectiveness of the writing.

**Publicity:** Students have many things on their minds and remembering the presence of a Writing Fellow is far from their highest priority; it is important, if the service is to be used to its fullest, to have maximum publicity – through posters, articles in student newspapers, emails and so forth – and to present students with reminders at intervals throughout the year. I am grateful to the many tutors who took a moment to refer individual students to me, or to remind their classes about the service. I believe that it would be helpful in future to put more emphasis on the Writing Fellow as a service for all students and not just those who are having particular difficulties with their essays. Anyone can improve – and some of my tutorials this year demonstrated that even the brightest of students have something to gain.

**Help for staff:** In the course of the year, I was consulted by a handful of tutors from various departments about their writing. It was mentioned that some might be glad to take part in a writing group for lecturers who are preparing papers for publication, with the Writing Fellow in attendance. I hadn't the time to pursue this in 2004-2005, but it may be a project for my successors to consider.

#### **Extract from a Fellow's Commentary on her Year in Post**

Most of the students who came to me for help were studying in the Literature, Film and Theatre Studies department, although there were representatives from subjects as diverse as Robotics and Politics. It was an interesting and diverting challenge to engage with such a wide variety of subjects; I learned a lot!

In the 1:1 sessions the overwhelming problems brought by students were to do with structure: how to plan, paragraph and keep to the point. Many had problems interpreting the question; there were instances where the question was too vague to pin down and the student was referred back to the lecturer, but often the student had not approached the question in a calm, logical way. With these students my approach was to go back to the basic essay structure and emphasise the importance of planning. For those who had never actually planned an essay, I offered to talk them through a typical essay question. I also checked their first drafts for flow, style and evidence of sticking to the question.

A significant number of first year students found the shift in gear from 'A' level to university difficult; for mature students, this was more pronounced. Some students needed tuition in fairly basic matters such as paragraphing and sentence structure before they could begin to make sense at all; many said they had it all 'in their heads' but could not put it down on paper. They needed some basic pointers on style and flow.

In general, students spoke about their courses with enthusiasm and clearly felt they were well taught and well supported in their studies. However, there were students who lacked confidence and were hesitant to seek help. They did not want to look as though they were struggling (even when they clearly were). They were convinced that it was 'obvious' they were going to fail (even when they clearly weren't). I encouraged these students to talk to their lecturers and to come and see me two or three times during their next assignment (planning stage, first and final drafts, etc.) so that I could help them to keep on track and boost their confidence where necessary.

Some students brought marked essays and asked me to interpret the comments made by staff, as the students were unable to understand what was meant. Usually the comments amounted to good, clear feedback on what was successful and what had gone wrong in the essay, so that it was easy to see the link with the final mark.

Just occasionally, however, the comments were vague (or practically non-existent) and neither the student nor I could see where the essay had fallen short of the requirements of the question. While I always encouraged students to go back to the lecturer and ask for clarification, I suspect this did not always happen.

It is a luxury to be able to offer 1:1 tuition to students, and of great advantage to the university that this can be offered with only negligible cost. The value of individual supervision was seen in the raised levels of confidence and the increase in marks. It would be interesting to conduct research that could actually show what improvements, on average, were made. For now, I have only the circumstantial evidence of the return visits by satisfied customers, who waved their 'before' and 'after' marks with great glee. Even where the rise in marks was not substantial, students said they felt they were more at ease with the demands of their courses and more confident that they would succeed. I believe this was down to the good quality of the teaching in the university; I was able to build upon that by focusing on each student as an individual.

#### **Extract from a Fellow's Commentary on his Year in Post**

It has been a rewarding first year for me as an RLF Fellow. I came across many interesting and talented students, and I was plunged into a variety of subject matter. Some days I felt like I was on an express train travelling across highly different terrains. I was also visited by students who were finding the task of writing essays difficult, or even frightening. Many students were seeking reassurance, or lacked confidence in their own judgement or writing. Others were already achieving very respectable marks but wanted to improve on these; the way they were expressing themselves or structuring their essays prevented them from reaching their potential.

My time has almost exclusively been spent on one-to-one tutorials with students, and I sensed that they enjoyed and appreciated the amount of attention that I was able to give them and their essays. The majority of students would not have felt able to raise their concerns in a more public setting. Each session generally lasted about 45 minutes, although initial ones, where students sometimes came with past essays - and to size me up - were often shorter. I only held one class/workshop, with some 3<sup>rd</sup> year music students who were embarking on a final essay about musical theatre; the response to this workshop from the tutor and students was very positive, and the tutor is keen to invite me again, but earlier in the year next time. {...}

Many students came with a keen sense of what their problem was: for example, "odd jumps" and the linking of paragraphs. I think that developing an argument, or making their argument clear enough through the evidence

and examples that they had gathered, was a key concern for many students. The structure and argument of an essay featured over 60 times in my sessions. Sometimes students needed help reorganising their material so that their points were placed more cohesively. In tutorials we often worked on establishing the topic of a paragraph, and making sure that it wasn't a collection of scattered points. On the other hand, there were occasions when students were so eager to prove the relevance of the point they were making to the title of the essay that they were stating a phrase from the title far too often!

An issue that students were less aware of was writing too descriptively, without enough analysis. Sometimes they were describing and summarising, when the question asked them to compare and contrast, for example. Often, the simple act of telling me what their essay was all about helped them to discover the central idea for themselves. Similarly, students were sometimes unsure what to focus on when they could choose their own topic; by discussing it together, we were often able to discover exactly what it was that interested them and compose a title accordingly.

A more common problem, of which again students were often fully aware, was writing in a consistent voice which was correctly pitched for their audience. Some essays lurched between an academic tone and colloquial phrases. This whole issue is connected to vocabulary and word choice, of course, which was a frequent concern for students, as was grammar and punctuation (I have noted 55 instances of this in the boxes I tick on my student record forms).

I noticed that it was the introduction (which sometimes read as a conclusion) and the conclusion of an essay that students stumbled over quite often. Students would frequently find their stride two pages in, but the opening pages were a bumpy ride - sometimes irrelevant, regurgitating the title, making generalisations or simply dull. With conclusions, students would sometimes lob in a major and vitally interesting point which they should have introduced earlier; or write the same things as they written in their introduction.

We sometimes discussed the issue of research and sources, and rather less, citation systems and bibliography; the student handbooks are generally excellent at explaining these.

In the tutorials themselves, we frequently worked on grammar, syntax, punctuation, spelling and presentation. Gradually most students gained the confidence to identify mistakes as we read through it – reading aloud reveals so much. After I had suggested some corrections, they were often able to pick up the wand and satisfactorily change some howlers themselves. Occasionally, a rule needed to be explained to them, and practiced. The other most common activity of tutorials was to discuss and make structural changes to an existing draft. Some sessions were devoted more to the earlier stage of essay writing: generating ideas and drawing up a plan and structure of writing. {...}

I am confident that I have added to the breadth of the university's existing study skills arrangements. Several lecturers from different disciplines did inform me that their students had found their visits to me were very helpful, and I had students returning to me jubilant that they had achieved a higher mark than usual; such feedback was greatly appreciated. Another rewarding experience was to see students leave their sessions far less worried and with a sense of purpose – knowing what they had to do next. Some students mentioned that they had never thought of approaching the essay in the way we discussed, and I hope that they continue to apply this way of thinking to future essays, or work.

### **Extract from a Partner's Report**

The scheme at our institution was perhaps more successful than ever this academic year. We were fortunate in the addition of another Fellow to the existing team of two. This meant that we could retain the wide provision of 'one-to-one' tutorials and the weekly workshops. But it also meant that we could be more flexible in playing the two forms of student contact.

Practically, we took the same approach as in previous years to advertise the Fellowship. Emails to both staff and module leaders across the university, along with in-house magazine 'features', were backed up by posters across campus and by information left for reference with the student union. The Fellows were usefully included in induction meetings for arriving students, who were thereby alerted to the scheme and to the presence of a Fellow across their 3 years of study. We worked hard initially to continue past links, particularly with the Student Union support services, and to work with the mature students' officer to ensure that the scheme was broadly advertised amongst that constituency.

In terms of the Fellows' profile and workload within the university this year we decided to adopt a consistent approach week to week, in order to ensure that students could 'predict' how the scheme operated and so could benefit fully. We opted for a pattern of mainly one-to-ones spread between the three Fellows each week, alongside a weekly workshop session. One Fellow offered workshops on people's own writing, which were so successful that they ran across both semesters. These workshops certainly had a knock-on effect with regard to take-up of the one-to-on sessions – people tended to follow-up on discussions from the workshops. As a result, we will adopt the same patterning of more public fora alongside the tutorials next year.

#### 4. Sample Reports

The single major advance in institutional terms this year, one which gave the Fellowship even greater 'presence', was the decision to site the workshops in a new learning resources centre in the university library. This not only gave the Fellow and the students the benefit of newly upgraded space to work in, but had the advantage of offering the RLF scheme prominence as part of a university-wide 'resource'. My sense was that this in itself garnered additional take up for the 'one-to-ones'. It is true to say, though, that this past year has seen the tutorial side of the scheme more heavily subscribed than ever before (if not often over-subscribed). I regularly checked the booking rota, and the Fellows all had every tutorial 'slot' booked, often weeks in advance.

#### **Extract from a Partner's Report**

The RLF Fellow has been a much-valued presence again this past year. He has often been so busy it was hard to meet with him; he almost always had a student with him during his days here. His genial commitment to working closely with students on their essays and writing difficulties has become well known. This year I had some first hand experience of just how effective his intensive guidance could be. One of my students was working on a dissertation and wrote early drafts that were almost unreadable because she had very little idea how to structure an argument, she wrote incomplete or run-on sentences, and most tricky of all, she tried to give her writing force by using or more often misusing inappropriate elevated vocabulary. She seemed entirely unresponsive to my attempts to help her improve her writing, and I became convinced that she would do very badly if she even managed to submit a dissertation at all. On my recommendation she went to see the Fellow and worked with him steadily for several months, and her work gradually began to improve, so much so that in the end she achieved an impressive high upper second. I suspect that there were many similar cases over the year. The Fellow's meticulous care in reading student writing and then offering detailed advice about everything from grammar to the widest aims of the work, continues to impress me.

{...} I am often struck by how vital this work is and yet how invisible it can seem compared to the official curriculum teaching. I won't say it is unsung because many colleagues throughout the university have come to realise how important this work of the RLF Fellow has been, but of its very nature — confidential, one-to-one, and to a large extent an internal process of the development of writing skill — this work happens behind the scenes. Students really value the confidentiality and can be reluctant to admitting that they have been to consult the RLF Fellow, so we don't always know that the improvements we see in a specific case are a direct result of his efforts, although we are very aware of an overall improvement, and of course sometimes the students call attention to the changes themselves. {...}

We are extremely grateful to the Royal Literary Fund for the provision of a Writing Fellow. For the first time in many years questions about how to write and how to raise standards of writing are fully out in the open. The Fellow's contribution to the support of students as writers is having a significant influence on students, and also on the way we think about writing as a part of curricula and modes of assessment. We very much hope that this excellent scheme will be able to continue in the future.