

The Maynooth University Guide to Setting up a Writing Centre



The Writing Centre

Maynooth University

Preamble and Acknowledgements

This handbook is intended for use by colleagues either considering or charged with setting up a writing centre in a higher education institution. In its compilation we have drawn from our own experiences here in Maynooth University, from the work of colleagues in other Irish higher education institutions, from colleagues' experiences outside of Ireland, from the literature in the area and from the collective wisdom communicated through national and international professional networks about writing.

This handbook received support from the Higher Education Authority through the Strategic Innovation Development Fund (SIDF). As such, the development of the handbook is part of broader collaborative projects between Maynooth University and its SIDF cluster partners, Athlone Institute of Technology, Dublin City University and Dundalk Institute of Technology. Any one of our cluster partners, or any colleague across the sector, is free to repurpose, reuse and/or rebrand this document as they see fit; where this occurs, this handbook should be referenced as the source document.

We have made every attempt in this work to provide useful, practical advice. We note however, that context is hugely important. Therefore, we urge colleagues to use this handbook to complement your own ideas about what will be culturally and institutionally sensitive for your needs. We do not intend to be prescriptive; rather we hope that this handbook will be a prompt to help colleagues to consider the various factors which can influence the establishment of a writing centre.

We are very grateful to our colleagues, local and international, who kindly reviewed this document and offered suggestions. Their contributions have made this work much the richer.

Finally, we would welcome feedback on this document. If you have any comments please email them to us at writingcentre@nuim.ie

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Overview of the Topic: Writing Centres in Ireland

Our European colleague Katrin Girgensohn notes, with reference to work by Grimm (1996) and Bushmann (1991), that the proliferation of writing centres in colleges and universities in the United States is at more than 90%, alongside the fact that they remain 'so few and are often institutionally invisible' in Europe (Girgensohn 2012: 127). In Ireland, dedicated writing centres in higher education institutions are a relatively recent phenomenon, however, their growth in the past decade has been significant. At the time of compilation of this document, five of the seven Irish universities either had writing centres as a mainstream provision or in pilot mode. In the Institute of Technology (IoT) sector, the proportion of institutions with writing centres is smaller but there is a great deal of interest in the area at present and we predict that the provision of centres in IoTs will grow substantially in the coming five years. Affiliate and private Higher Education providers are also contributing to the conversation on writing centres and many of them also look set to offer writing support through the centre model in the not too distant future. The potential national provision of writing centres is something we anticipate and welcome wholeheartedly. The international writing centre community is famously collaborative and the nascent Irish approach today reflects that collegiality with a great deal of sharing of expertise and resources across the sector.

Rationale for a Writing Centre – Why Now?

Why an institution might choose to set up a writing centre is a matter for themselves, however, nationally there may be some reasons why writing centres are currently being established. It is not the purpose of this document to explore these reasons in detail; rather we wish to suggest some influences which the reader may choose to explore themselves outside of this publication. We believe that the following may be contributing factors as to why writing centres are emerging now:

- massification of higher education in Ireland, the much greater diversity of the student population and the welcome emphasis on access to higher education for non-traditional groups
- the recognition that writing can be used, not just as an output of enquiry, but as a form of enquiry
- the increasingly complex nature of the writing/written world where students need to navigate in multi-modal ways through a growing variety of genres
- the proliferation of knowledge and the need for ever evolving information literacy skills
- the desires and influences of a range of stakeholders, including employers
- a greater focus on graduate attributes which frequently include statements on written communication
- the celebration of the fact that written composition can help us to not only learn about the world but to create the world; to not only learn about ourselves but to develop ourselves
- the continuing necessity for ethics, honesty and authenticity and the constant need to re-examine these areas in electronic and virtual worlds
- that the need for good writers remains and is likely to continue
- that writing can be learned, can be transformative and can be joyful.

We do not suggest that this list is exhaustive, or that all of these factors did not exist in the past. What we suggest is that the current prominence of these issues is contributing to the growing provision of writing centres in Higher Education in Ireland.

The Writing Centre as Learning Centre

We believe our writing centre is a learning centre. We acknowledge the guidance of our colleagues Íde O'Sullivan and Lawrence Cleary of University of Limerick Regional Writing Centre in identifying for us, through several conversations, that this approach would be a useful one to consider. In our research-based exploration of our centre as a learning centre we identified the following reasons why we believe we can declare it as such:

- it is learner-centred
- its approach is one which is enquiry-based, active and collaborative
- it is committed to deep learning through appropriate pedagogies
- it is personalised
- it is mindful of the need for empathy and understanding
- it promotes co-enquiry and transfer
- it recognises writing as a process
- it accommodates learning preferences and embraces diversity
- it strives to help students to understand their world
- it is a place where transformative learning is nurtured.

Getting Started – Mission and Values

In general, the provision of a writing centre arises from an institution's desire to help students to become better writers. In our writing centre we identify our mission as follows:

The Maynooth University Writing Centre works collaboratively to support our students to become more competent, flexible, fluent and enthusiastic writers.

In our strategy statement we identify the values that guide our work and our overall aspiration with regards writing on campus. For us they are as follows:

In our centre we aim to work within a culture of equity, inclusiveness, respect and openness. We aspire to be part of a transformative learning experience in our interactions with colleagues and students. Our approach is non-judgmental and friendly. We aim to provide a positive atmosphere which encourages creativity, reinforces integrity and emphasizes authenticity.

We aspire to create a culture across campus where writing, as composition and enquiry, is valued, practised, celebrated and enjoyed by all our staff and students.

For each institution the mission and values will be different, however, it is probably important to be able to articulate both of these prior to moving to the logistics and the practicalities. The mission and vision certainly helps to clarify what your priorities will be and with whom you will work.

Practical Considerations – What? Who? Where? When? How much?

Having considered the mission, values, rationale and pedagogy of the centre, day-to-day considerations need to be addressed. The first of these stems directly from the previous work and it is the question:

What are the writing centre's goals?

Muriel Harris explores this idea more fully in 'The Concept of a Writing Centre' (2006) and poses the following questions:

- What need is the writing centre meeting?
- Who is it supposed to serve?
- What role is it to play?

The answers to these questions may help colleagues to answer other ones which centre on logistics such as:

- How will the centre be funded?
- Where will the centre be based?
- Who will manage the centre?
- Will there be a writing centre team and how will that be established?
- To whom will the centre report and how will its work be guided?
- What will the centre's provision look like, in hours and in offerings?
- What, if any, equipment will the centre need?
- How will it maintain records?
- How will it connect with other academic supports on campus; for example, the Library?
- How will the work of the centre be evaluated?
- What policies apply to the centre?
- How will the centre communicate with students and staff?
- Who will the tutors be?
- How will tutors be selected?
- What training will be offered to tutors, where, when and how often?
- What about boundaries? What will the centre not do?

Answering these questions, or at least attempting to answer them, will help to clarify some of the practical issues around establishing a centre. The order in which these answers might be addressed or how they translate into action will vary from context to context, however, the chronology of steps outlined in the next section might help anyone starting from scratch with this project.

Steps for Setting Up a Writing Centre

Scoping - some things to do first

Research and network! There is no shortage of models about what a writing centre might look like. Equally, there is a great deal of research around writing centres and no end of literature. In order to make this stage manageable we recommend the following steps:

- Visit other writing centres and look for a variety of systems and approaches
- Read Stephen North's article, 'The Idea of a Writing Centre' (1984)
- Visit the International Writing Centers¹ Association webpage (writingcenters.org) as well as other writing centre web pages, both national and international
- Join three listservs – the International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) listserv, the European Association for the Teaching of Academic Writing (EATAW) listserv and the Irish Network for the Enhancement of Writing (INEW) listserv
- Attend a writing centre conference, either EWCA or IWCA Conference
- If possible, attend the IWCA Summer Institute
- Read Leigh Ryan and Lisa Zimmerelli's, *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors* (2010)
- Have tea/coffee with colleagues who run writing centres

Consult and make the case

Unless the call to establish a writing centre has come from senior management you will need to make the case to establish the centre. How you do this depends on your context, the institutional culture and strategy, as well as institutional priorities and staff and student needs. A research-informed approach to this question should hold most sway. There may also be policy issues that a writing centre can address, such as Access strategies, retention concerns, national strategies or indeed, the establishment of the centre may be institutionally strategic or demand driven (by staff or students).

It is impossible to be prescriptive about the case one needs to make. However, the steps outlined in the previous 'Scoping' section are a good start. Hearing about the rationale for writing centres in other institutions is helpful and could provide you with the beginnings of an argument in the case where you have to make one. It is also very useful to consult with your colleagues and students about the idea of a writing centre and what it might look like for your institution. Institutional staff committees (for example, Faculty committees, Academic Council, Teaching and Learning Committees) and the range of academic support services that can exist on campus could also help to guide your discussion. As with many higher education initiatives (in our experience) a consultation with staff in the Library is usually instructive and insightful (and frequently enjoyable!)

¹ Note American spelling, center, as opposed to European spelling; centre.

Sign off, project planning and getting started

Once your institution has signed off on the idea of establishing a writing centre, and the initial consultation with staff and interest groups is completed, the next stage is to agree a project plan for the work. This project plan will consider the logistical/practical issues of the centre and the pedagogical approach; each will complement the other and therefore, they frequently run in tandem. As a result, the chronology can break down at this point so the following stages are presented thematically with a notional chronology. Colleagues are advised that this exact sequence may not make sense in every institution but it is hoped it will provide some idea of what an approach could look like.

Before beginning this stage we recommend the drafting of a project plan. This plan should include, minimally, the following:

- Context of the project – brief description of this
- Rationale, mission and vision
- Aim of the project
- Any working definitions that are important
- Project plan – goals, actions and milestones, communication strategy, records strategy, project personnel and financial planning
- Project management – personnel and approach
- Risks
- Success measures/Quality measures
- Work Breakdown Structure (WBS) – mapped with persons responsible for actions and deadlines
- Monitoring and evaluation at appropriate points.

Who is the Centre for?

It is important to be clear about who your ‘audience’ will be. Establishing whom the centre caters for is essential for other decisions including location and staffing. Many centres work exclusively with undergraduate and postgraduate students. They will work with students across a range of disciplines and at all levels. Generally, writing centres work with mainstream students, with non-traditional students and with students with a range of particular learning or other needs. In our centre, we happily work with all students but we stress that we do not have expertise in other areas, for example, dyslexia. Similarly, we work with international students, Erasmus students and other students with English as a second or other language but we do not offer special support in this area. We maintain that we offer writing support and that we work with students to become better writers; we cannot claim to be able to help them with anything else.

Some centres work directly with staff where staff wish to develop their own writing. They may also work with staff to help colleagues to support student writing. This may take the form of team teaching with staff and/or developing writing programmes with staff. In this way, writing centre staff may be instrumental in the development of Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC), Writing in the Disciplines (WID) or Writing Enriched/Enhanced Curriculum (WEC). Where writing programmes exist in Ireland, they tend to have strong connections

with nascent writings centres. For us, there is an important distinction between writing centre work and writing programme development, where the former is largely a student-facing pursuit and the latter involves curriculum design and pedagogical discussions with staff. In the United States, some institutions do combine all writing support and development under a centre heading where the entity may be called 'A Centre for Writing' as opposed to writing centre. This subtle difference can carry with it a different ethos where the Centre for Writing is a whole university community initiative with both staff and students.

Location

The location of the writing centre is an important consideration. Ideally the location will reflect the ethos of the centre and will be designed around the atmosphere you wish to create and the fulfilment of the writing centre's purpose. If you have a choice around where the centre will be based, consider this carefully, especially with regards to your potential users. You will need to consider the buildings or university areas students most often frequent. Where are they most likely to want to visit the writing centre? It would be good if you could visit some centres in different institutions to see what different models look like. Many writing centres are based in libraries or in learning commons. This model appears to work well.

Visibility, by being located near busy areas such as the library or student service hubs, will encourage awareness of the centre's existence as well as have a beneficial impact on the scale of advertising needed. The location may influence the nature of the support that can be provided, which in turn determines who can access the support.

On the other hand, there is every likelihood that you might not get to choose where your centre is located. You may be given a space, for your own use or to share. Where this happens, assuming that space does not wholly contradict your work and your ethos, it is probably worth taking what you can get in order to get started. Where it is a shared space another layer of complexity exists. Any shared space will involve agreed ground rules, negotiation and compromise. However, it can also have the benefit of shared resources and perhaps a larger presence on campus. As with most things, there is no ideal set up. Generally, if the location is safe and adequate it is worth a pilot project at least.

Virtual space will also be important for the writing centre and you will need a web space within your institution's VLE or equivalent in order to communicate with students and to store frequently used resources.

Personnel

There are many staffing related questions which will need to be considered when one is setting up. These include:

- Who will direct the centre? Will that position be part-time or full-time? To whom will that person report?

- Who will staff the centre? Peer tutors/undergraduates and/or postgraduate students? Will staff be full-time, part-time or hired on an occasional basis? Will tutors be paid or will they be volunteers? If paid, what rates would be appropriate?
- How might your tutors be recruited?
- What qualities are you looking for in your tutors?
- How will tutors be trained? By whom? Will Continuing Professional Development (CPD) opportunities be offered to tutors? What shape will that take? Will tutors be remunerated for participating in CPD?
- How will staff be evaluated? By whom?
- How many staff will you hire?

In our view, the success of the Maynooth University Writing Centre is due to the calibre of the tutors. Thus, hiring the right people is key to the establishment, continuity and reputation of the centre. Tutors are the first encounter with the writing centre, so a positive, professional experience is essential for all participants. In our centre, we look for tutors who are:

- A postgraduate, or in pursuit of a postgraduate degree, in any discipline
- An experienced teacher/tutor in any discipline
- An excellent writer
- Learner-centred in his/her approach
- An excellent communicator
- Capable of working within a team and independently
- In possession of excellent interpersonal and organizational skills
- Sensitive to students' writing concerns and mindful of the need to maintain confidentiality where required
- Committed to creating a safe and engaging learning environment for students
- Particularly enthusiastic about text and about helping students to become better writers.

Training/Development is essential for new tutors. This may be a combination of pre-employment training and Continuing Professional Development (CPD). Pre-employment training would involve information about the centre in terms of mission, vision and goals, record keeping, pedagogical approaches and strategies, connecting with students but maintaining boundaries, as well as institutional policies and procedures and practical issues in terms of administration and logistics. In our centre we have designed a Peer Tutoring Handbook which guides our work. Though this is a substantial undertaking, it is a very useful document, particularly where tutors are new to the role.

The training offered to tutors prepares them to work in the centre and to identify more clearly where their role starts and finishes. Tutors should be professional, friendly and helpful; they need to be patient and accepting. No query should be deemed too trivial if the student is concerned about it. Moreover, a non-judgemental reception of student queries will positively affect the reputation of the centre.

The number of appointments you offer and hence, the number of tutors employed, will depend greatly on the nature of the support offered in the centre, student numbers, student demand and practical issues such as college-wide assignment deadlines. There may be

periods of high demand. However, as these may be one-off type scenarios, it is probably best to evaluate the overall patterns regularly in the initial stages of the establishment of the centre and respond accordingly later in terms of extra staff or appointments at particular times of the semester.

Just as the centre needs to be a supportive place for students, it needs to be a supportive place for tutors. This can be achieved in several ways but one of the most practical solutions for us, in our centre, is that there are always two tutors working at the same time. While this has several benefits, two key ones are, that tutors are supported by having a colleague to consult with if a difficult query arises and that tutors are not left alone with a student if a difficult situation arises.

As one might expect, communication with and between tutors is essential. In our centre, we see our tutors as a team and we try to facilitate the building of the team in a range of ways but particularly through regular team meetings. These gatherings are useful for establishing tutor rapport and support, as well as a means of providing a safe space for voicing difficulties, considering new situations that may have been encountered and assessing daily practicalities such as record keeping, number of appointments, peaks and troughs and so on.

Service – what will you offer?

In terms of day-to-day activity, the centre may offer a range of writing related supports and services, however, the core part of the activity will be one-to-one consultations between students and writing centre tutors (sometimes called ‘consultants’). Depending on the institution, these appointments will take a specific amount of time (in our centre, 45 minutes) and they will be pre-booked. Centres might also offer some/all of the following:

- Drop-in writing help
- One-to-one tutoring by appointment
- Discipline-specific work with individual departments
- Referral to other services/supports on campus
- Group working space
- Access to relevant materials and hand-outs
- Web-based learning materials including self-diagnostic tests
- Interdisciplinary and collaboratively provided workshops; for example, work with the Library, Access, Assistive Technologies, individual or groups of academic departments
- Scheduled topic specific sessions (‘hot topics’)
- The provision of Writers’ Retreats.

The extent to which any/all of the above are offered is entirely institution dependent. Where one is deciding to start small and take steps to developing the centre we recommend beginning with a calendar of one-to-one bookable appointments. Software packages exist that can help the person managing the centre to co-ordinate these slots, however, an email address and a shared web-based calendar can serve just as well when one is beginning.

In our work, which complements our student facing writing centre provision, we also work with colleagues to support writing in the disciplines through:

- Team teaching and writing contributions to mainstream module provision
- The provision of a summer institute (SWIFT – Summer Writing Institute For Teachers) for colleagues on and off campus
- Writing Liaison Programme (pilot)
- Lunchtime seminar series for staff
- Master classes and workshops with international experts
- Assignment Litmus Test (pilot)
- Facilitating dedicated department links with the centre
- Co-enquiry into WAC, WID and WEC, where these occur and how they could be further supported on campus
- Encouraging an ongoing conversation on campus about writing.

A centre might also be engaged in on-campus, national and international research into academic writing and literacy. It is also useful, both locally and nationally, for staff of the writing centre to liaise regularly with colleagues in other Higher Education institutes and across the wider writing centre community. There is a strong commitment to the sharing of resources and good practice in the sector.

Records

You will need to keep some record of the students who attend the centre. We began with a standard record form for paper based record keeping. This form was checked with our Freedom of Information and Data Protection office who advised us on good practice; it would be useful to connect with your local equivalent of this office. Questions to be considered around record keeping include:

- What information will need to be gathered? For whom? For what purpose? How often? How will it be distributed?
- How will records be kept?

Though we began with a paper-based system we have since moved to electronic record keeping. This has the advantage of gradual data entry (at every visit) of the records and it makes for much easier interrogation of the data at the end of the year. There are many models of writing centre records available, which many centres are happy to share on request.

Equipment and Resources

The equipment you require will also reflect the type of work that is going to happen in the centre. Usually some storage space is required so a filing cabinet or other secure storage space would be useful. As many resources are online now, access to a PC or laptop is also becoming a necessity. Comfortable seating and round tables are our preference but this too will vary from space to space.

A dictionary and/or thesaurus are also essential to have to hand for all one-to-one appointments.

With regards other resources the world really is your oyster. The great thing about setting up a writing centre is that so many people have done this before you; hence, you can build on the work that has preceded your initiative. This is absolutely the case with regards resources. One decision we made when we set up our centre was not to develop our own resources but rather to spend some time sourcing resources that we thought were of a high quality from what already existed. This is an exercise that each centre can do for itself in order to identify the materials that will best work for your context. The difficulty is not in finding the resources so much as choosing which ones to include and which ones to omit. Because there is so much information available we regularly review our bank of resources to make sure that what we have posted is still relevant to our student population.

In terms of storage, we have a dedicated space on our University's VLE (Moodle) where we host our resources. Resources can also be hosted on a website or indeed, hard copy handouts can be used if space permits, but the Moodle space works for us. Our resources are grouped under topics that are useful for our students, such as Essay Writing, Writing Processes, Writing in Exams, Grammar and Punctuation, Referencing and Citation, and so on. We also have discipline specific materials which our colleagues from various departments have provided for us.

All of the above are dependent on funding, the location of the centre and the number of staff. It is probably best to start small and build up the range of what can be provided or offered, as it can be difficult to anticipate demand in advance.

Advertising

There is little point having a wonderful writing centre and no students. Advertising is necessary especially in the first few years when the University community is still learning about the centre's existence. In advertising our centre we connect with staff and students. This work has taken the form of straightforward contact, telling folks about what we do, as well as more creative marketing such as running writing related events on campus. Both are effective and both contribute to one of our broader aims, which is to encourage writing and conversations about writing across the campus.

Practically, advertising should provide basic information such as what the service is or provides, the venue and opening hours. The location itself should have good signage and advertising in areas of high student traffic such as the library, student services and any other relevant areas. Some suggestions for means of advertising are as follows:

- Orientation Week Presentations or Information Desk
- Website or college in-house sites such as Moodle or Blackboard
- Twitter
- Posters and flyers
- All-student emails
- All-staff emails

Similar to writing centre tutors being a great resource, they can also be one of the best advertisements for the centre. If the experience is positive, students will tell their friends and colleagues and thereby, promote both the centre and its reputation.

Being part of the campus community – connecting

When setting up a writing centre it is very useful to see your contribution in the bigger institutional picture. In our centre, connecting with the University community is essential to our work. As a result, we aim to work in a collaborative fashion with colleagues all across campus. As one might expect, the group we work closest with is that of academic staff. Equally, our connections with the Library are key to our capacity to provide a coherent approach to the support we are offering. Our work is part of the larger network of academic support on campus and as a result we work with colleagues who are helping students with their academic work in various ways. Moreover, maintaining strong communication with non-academic student supports is also very important; for example, the Counselling Service. Linking with colleagues in this way not only makes the work more interesting and more enjoyable, it also helps you and the students you meet to decipher where the best help for each particular concern rests. Knowing what else is on offer in terms of student supports helps us to establish the boundaries of our work and to identify where the best referral points are for students with issues that are not writing related.

Evaluating Your Writing Centre

Evaluating your centre is good practice and may prove vital in terms of institutional support for your work. Aside from identifying the challenges associated with our work and where we might make improvements, evaluation helps us to articulate that which we are doing well, which is motivational for the whole team. As with all evaluation, one should engage with the process with a clear sense of what it is you wish to learn.

We see our evaluation/review processes as being formative and summative. Part of our own evaluation on our practice occurs in our team meetings where we devote time at every gathering to explore how things are going in the centre – what is working, what isn't and any action we need to take. Another element to our formative processes is our record keeping at each appointment where we gather data that helps us to understand who is coming to the centre, how often and with what queries. This regular data gathering can throw up some good questions and ultimately the content of the record sheets can also provide useful summative information. We also follow up, randomly and by email, with students who have attended one-to-one appointments.

At the end of each semester we conduct an online survey with our users to get feedback on a range of aspects associated with our work. The data collected, combined with our records and other evaluative measures throughout the year, are compiled into an annual report. As part of this process, we can identify, over a period of operation, patterns of usage which will influence the ongoing operation of the services provided. These patterns of usage will also have a bearing on future staffing, funding, resources and perhaps, location.

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Useful Publications

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Online Resources

- Institute for Writing and Rhetoric, Dartmouth College: <https://writing-speech.dartmouth.edu/teaching/first-year-writing-pedagogies-methods-design>
- International Writing Centers Association: <http://writingcenters.org/resources/starting-a-writing-cente/>
- National Writing Project, Writing Center Resources, University of California: <http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/3584>
- Texas A & M University, University Writing Center, <http://writingcenter.tamu.edu>
- University of Limerick Regional Writing Centre: <http://www.ul.ie/rwc/>
- University of Wisconsin – Madison, The Writing Center: <http://www.writing.wisc.edu/Instructor/Instructor-highlight.html>

Useful Networks

- European Association for the Teaching of Academic Writing (EATAW)
- Irish Network for the Enhancement of Writing (INEW)
- International Writing Centers Association (IWCA)

About the Authors/Contributors

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Alison Farrell is Teaching Development Officer in the Centre for Teaching and Learning, Maynooth University where she is also Head of the University's Writing Centre. She has been directly involved in Education since 1994 and has worked in a wide range of pedagogical areas at all levels. She is a founding member and current co-chair of the Irish Network for the Enhancement of Writing (INEW). She is also the founder of the Summer Writing Institute For Teachers (SWIFT). Her research interests include composition and enquiry, literacy, academic writing and collaboration. She holds a PhD in English.