

Final essays got
you feeling like,
“This is fine”?



Schedule a writing center session!

QUESTIONING THE WRITING CENTER: CONTEXTS, QUERIES, CONTEMPLATIONS

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**IMAGE OF:
WRITING CENTER FLYER**

Created by Amanda M. May, 2023.

Q FOR QUESTION



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ABSTRACT

Using Kathi's "Q for Question" video as a guiding framework, this section identifies five driving questions I have as a writing center director at a small comprehensive institution. These questions emerge not only from Kathi's video interview but also from the context (my current institution) and the field at large. While the queries that arise from my contemplations, they can be adapted to support other writing centers.

Viewing “Q for Question” from my current position yielded three key standouts:

“AMANDA, YOU’RE SEEING THE TREES. I NEED YOU TO STEP BACK AND SEE THE FOREST.”

- Yancey, Advising Meeting

“IF YOU TRUST THE PROCESS... YOU COLLECT SOME DATA THAT CAN TEACH YOU LESSONS THAT YOU DIDN’T EVEN KNOW YOU WERE ON YOUR RADAR.”

- Yancey, “Q for Question”

“IF YOU IDENTIFY [THE IDEAL], YOU WILL GET CLOSER THAN YOU WILL IF YOU DON’T.”

- Yancey, “Q for Question”

When I started at Florida State in 2016, I knew I wanted to study rhetoric and composition because of my extensive writing center background and my experiences teaching abroad. I am also a lover of fine details, a blessing and a bane when it comes to research.

I mention this background because, as Kathi points out in her video segment, positionality matters because it shapes the questions asked.

With few exceptions, my writing center experience prior to my current position took place in centers staffed by others with some writing center expertise. As my colleagues here have pointed out, I’m the first person with this extensive of a background to run our center in its 37 years of existence, and I serve a hybrid role as both writing center director and assistant professor of English. Almost five years in, and I am finally beginning to feel like an expert in my local context, an “expertise” that was delayed by starting my position during the pandemic.

A driving question, as I continue both of my roles here, and one that ties to Kathi’s questions is:

What do writers at this institution need?

It’s a question I started asking in my third year, one that has shaped large parts of my work going forward.

As an instructor, I constantly ask what writers know, what they need to know to be successful in other contexts, and how to make knowledge in my course relevant to them. As writing center director, I ask that question about student writers across majors, programs, and campuses, but I also inquire what faculty writers need as researchers as well as educators including writing in their courses.

Sometimes, questions crop up in unexpected places. The science and math tutoring service at our institution hosts a weekly gathering for coffee and donuts, during which, in conversation with a staff member with extensive knowledge of our context, I raised the lack of engagement with writing center workshops.

He pulled a student into the conversation, and through that, I learned the word “workshop” was a deterrent even if it was common in my field.

In that moment, I stumbled across a question I wasn't aware I needed to ask:

What will writers at this institution respond to or engage with?

I've since thought more about the way I promote writing center workshops (both in terms of design and distribution) and altered the language I use when discussing them from workshops to events to increase appeal.

Both of these questions have been generative.

Over the course of the past five years, I have expanded our online offerings through asynchronous email sessions and online events (i.e. to better support writers across campus and established a faculty writing accountability group), but that one question has raised another:

What do tutors at this institution need?

Our current training models were not as structured as my prior institutions, which led me to develop a set of modules paired with practice sessions.

In developing this localized training with the help of tutors over the summer semester, I was able to recognize what I already knew about our institution's needs.

Moving forward, I'm also working to make our meetings more tutor-centered so they can take on leadership positions and share some of their knowledges and expertise within the center.

Starting this year (my fifth year), I also began requiring tutors to lead a staff meeting or a writing center event to gain more leadership experience and increase their engagement in the space.



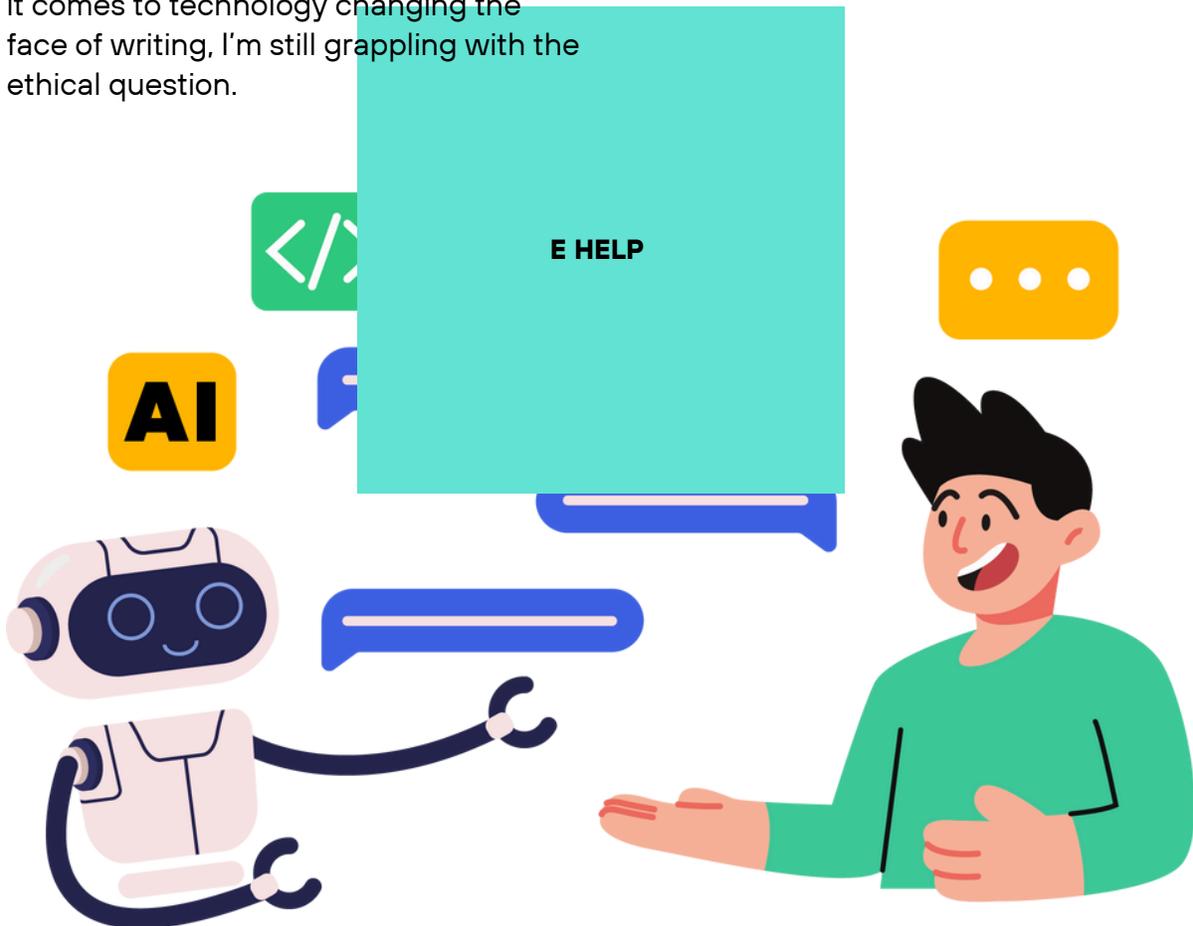
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In terms of research, writing center directors are unsurprisingly discussing AI frequently. As both instructor and director, I find myself asking:

HOW CAN AI BE USED TO SUPPORT WRITERS? AND GIVEN IT TAKES WITHOUT ASKING (WHICH RUNS COUNTER TO MY PERSONAL ETHICS), SHOULD IT BE?

In an ideal world, AI would be used as a supportive technology rather than as a shortcut to finish the product. While I've seen AI used as a collaborator in open-world games like Skyrim and I consider myself an open-minded individual when it comes to technology changing the face of writing, I'm still grappling with the ethical question.

That said, AI isn't going away, and in my roles as writer, writing center director, and instructor, I wonder how it can support writers in different spaces and at different points of the writing process.



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