

# JACOBSON CENTER TELEGRAM



Issued in early fall and winter, the Jacobson Center Telegram informs Smith staff, faculty, and students about newsworthy developments in the work of the Jacobson Center and the teaching of writing.

## NEWS & DEVELOPMENTS

Greetings, everyone! We hope that your classes are off to a good start and everyone is enjoying the cooler weather.

This fall the Jacobson Center welcomed two new colleagues: Alex Terrell and Laura Greenfield. Alex is a teacher and fiction writer whose work has been featured in *Black Warrior Review*, *Puerto del Sol* magazine, and *Best American Experimental Fiction*. A graduate of the UMass/Amherst MFA program, she is also the recipient of the Robert J. Dau/Pen America Short Story Prize for Emerging Writers. Laura is a respected authority on language, power, and education with a long career as a teacher and administrator, most recently as founding director of the Transformative Speaking Program at Hampshire College. She is the editor (with Karen Rowan) of *Writing Centers and the New Racism: A Call for Sustainable Dialogue and Change* and the author of *Radical Writing Center Praxis: A Paradigm for Ethical Political Engagement*. She holds a PhD from The George Washington University.

In the classroom, we are happy to have launched the WRT (Writing and Public Discourse) course prefix. Currently, we are offering courses in academic writing, creative nonfiction, and journalism (formerly ENG 118, 119, 135, and 136). We look forward to expanding the offerings. During interterm, we will be offering a 1-credit course titled *Writing for Impact: Transforming Academic Writing for a Public Audience*; the course is offered in partnership with the Wurtele Center and is taught by Pat Stacey. It focuses on enabling students to translate one of their strong academic papers into a newspaper or magazine article. Pat is an experienced teacher, editor, and writer who has written for *The Atlantic Monthly* and *The New York Times*, among other publications. She is also the author of the full-length memoir, *The Boy Who Loved Windows: Opening the Heart and Mind of a Child with Autism*. Please encourage your students to check out the course.

## SPOTLIGHT

The Jacobson Center has received a \$450K gift from Anne and Fred Cowett, children of Joan and Jack Jacobson, to support Practitioners' Courses in journalism. These courses will be taught by professional journalists and will supplement the concentration offerings.

## UPCOMING EVENTS

10/18, Seelye 301, 4:30pm  
**Academic Reading Workshop**  
Duncan Griffin

10/24, Seelye 301, 4:30pm  
**Long-Form Writing Workshop**  
Duncan Griffin & Sara Eddy

10/25, Seelye 307, 3:30p,  
**All-Centers Open House**  
Jacobson Center Staff

11/29, Seelye 301, 4:30pm  
**Test-Prep & Test-Taking Workshop**  
Duncan Griffin

# COMMENTARY

*on writing anxiety*

by Sara Eddy, Assistant Director

In the past few academic years, the peer writing tutors who work for the Jacobson Center have reported that a huge—and growing—part of their job seems to be reassuring students who encounter terrible difficulties in the writing process. Even when they have produced strong writing, these students are convinced it's sub-par, and that they aren't living up to Smith standards.

These students are suffering from writing anxiety, a specialized subset of Generalized Anxiety Disorder. To a certain extent all writers encounter this, but at its most extreme it can make students freeze up and feel paralyzed, or feel that they will never meet their professors'—or their own—expectations. Some students feel jumpy and fractious when writing, and move from place to place on campus, trying to settle. Others feel so overwhelmed that they put off their assignments until the night before they're due—or worse, stop writing altogether and face the consequences in their courses. If Generalized Anxiety causes panic attacks, avoidance, and agoraphobia,

Writing Anxiety does the same, only in the microcosm of writing assignments. But what causes Writing Anxiety? One of the principal causes is super-high academic expectations, both from faculty and from the students themselves. Other factors include neurodivergent learning styles, histories of traumatic interactions over writing (especially with teachers), and a feeling of unpreparedness or imposter syndrome—which can be especially acute for students of color, first-gen, and International students.

Fortunately, there are many possible interventions that can help lessen this anxiety. Here are just a few—and we recommend a trial and error method to determine what works best for students and indeed anyone struggling with writing anxiety:

- Set a timer and write in short spurts
- Set a short writing goal (“I’m going to draft this paragraph and then be done for now”)
- Implement a reward system (“after I finish this section I can take a walk/ have a cookie...”)

- Write a consciously “shitty first draft,” to get words on paper
- Split up a longer paper into separate documents for different sections
- Write in the company of someone else in the same course, to keep each other accountable and provide peer feedback
- Talk through your ideas with a friend, family member, or writing center professional
- Make an appointment with the writing center for 1-2 weeks before the paper is due, so that you have a deadline to meet earlier than the actual due date
- Remember that everyone will still love you even if the paper isn't your best work!

Most cases of writing anxiety are mild or moderate, but when it becomes debilitating we often recommend making an appointment with Duncan Griffin, the Jacobson Center's Learning Skills specialist. The Office of Disability Services can also provide support, if the student suspects neurodivergence may be a factor in their anxieties. Writing is hard for everyone, but Smith provides multiple avenues toward support and success



## PERSPECTIVES

*on thesis writing support*  
from Paige Passantino '23

I had a really excellent experience at the Jacobson Center having a writing advisor for my thesis and can't imagine doing it without one. The thesis process sometimes feels isolating, especially since you are replacing a class or two with independent work, and you don't necessarily have classmates going through the same thing as you. Having a writing advisor gave me a responsive reader who I

could constantly check in with about this process outside of my department advisor. It was helpful to have a tangible check-in each week that held me accountable to the work, as time management is something that also felt challenging in doing an entire year of independent writing. The retreats offered over break also provided a community for us thesis writers and I found that incredibly beneficial and completed a lot of important work during those intentional hours. My writing advisor helped me set goals, determine where to place

my attention for the time being, and definitely reminded me that the work would get done one week at a time. I felt comfortable sharing draft material that still needed a lot of work and knowing we would talk about it in both broad strokes and also on a line-by-line basis. After consistently reading my work, my advisor was able to point out patterns in my writing to look out for as I continued on the process and then I was able to address those issues on my own. Overall, it was a very helpful and encouraging experience.