OVERCOMING STARTER’S BLOCK

Dr. Christopher Baldwin
Dean
College of Arts and Sciences

I wonder how many of you suffer from the same disease that I used to have? Not exactly “writers block,” I always seemed to have plenty to write, probably too much judging by the comments of tutors and editors. More precisely it was “starters block”: an inability to get up-and-running!

How can I try to explain this? If it’s not in the genes then it’s probably something environmental. Right? Remember that I’m English and grew up in the United Kingdom about as far from the ocean as you can get. Each summer we went for two weeks vacation to the seaside. The sea is always darned cold—frequently only in the 50’s or 60’s even in midsummer. I remember all sorts of ploys to acclimatize, such as gingerly splashing water up my legs and on my arms, a cold damp hand across the chest, a double handful splashed into the face. None worked! You just had to dive in, try to catch your breath and fight through the pain barrier. In contrast, my Dad, who grew up living by the sea, would get into his swim shorts, run down the beach, and with a whoop plunge straight in, quite accidentally, I’m sure, splashing me on the way.

As a scientist I used to write in just the same way. I tried all the conventional good practices, all the acclimatization ploys. I could manage to write an outline or first write the body of the paper and all the conclusions, but I could never actually write the very first word as it would appear in its final form. Somehow this would evolve out of countless iterations, all handwritten and all crossed out and redone. I’m not quite sure of what it was that I perceived as the “pain.” My essays and papers as a student at Liverpool University were never really savaged by my academic tutors. Certainly, when I started to write papers for the scientific journals, they were fairly mutilated by editors and reviewers, but I don’t recall that they ever took particular exception to my first sentences. What was I scared of? I still don’t know.

In my twenty plus years of teaching, I have made an oft-repeated comment to my students (undergraduate, masters, and Ph.D.) who have exhibited precisely my

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type of starters block: “You won’t do it until you do it.” Perhaps none of us like to be judged or corrected. Perhaps too many of us had our very early writings in grade school butchered by a too-heavy-handed style-censor in the guise of Mrs. what’s-her-name! The reality is that writing is a craft. The more you do, the more you share and exchange, and the more constructive guidance you get, the better you become. In this University we need a place where we can all go to improve our writing craft, a place where there is little or no “pain” in being edited and advised about our writing. We have plenty of people with great skill—indeed national and international reputations as writers and editors. We need a writing center.

And now I can’t think of a slick closing sentence. Shoot, I’ve contracted “closer’s block”!

**YOU'RE INVITED**

**YOUNG ADULT CONFERENCE**

The Ninth Annual Young Adult Conference, sponsored by the SHSU Department of Library Science, will be held on Saturday, November 4, 1995. Keynote speakers for the conference include YA authors Berthe Amoss, Janet Bode, Dallin Malmgren, Naomi Shihab Nye, Patricia Wrede, and Betty Carter. Workshop sessions will include various topics such as storytelling, book talking, and programming. Registration is $60 before October 1, 1995, and $75 after the deadline. Fees include lunch, refreshments, and materials on YA literature. For more information, please contact:

Dr. Teri Lesesne  
YAC Coordinator  
P.O. Box 2236  
Huntsville, TX 77341-2236  
(409) 294-1151  
(409) 294-1153 FAX  
tsl@tenet.edu E-Mail

**READING LIKE A WRITER**

Dr. Bradley G. Siebert  
Assistant Professor  
Division of English and Foreign Languages

*He had been conveyed by friends an hour or two before to the house at which she was staying; the party of visitors at the other house, of whom he was one, and thanks to whom it was his theory, as always, that he was lost in the crowd, had been invited over to luncheon.*

The preceding fifty-five-word sentence, the second from Henry James’ story, “The Beast in the Jungle,” stared up at me from the page. I stared back and thought, “Wait a second. What?”

I was reading the story because I had been assigned to by my freshman composition teacher. A writing assignment, of course, loomed in the future. I began to recite my mantra, “I have to get an A. I have to get an A.” I read the sentence again. Again I asked, “What?”

I knew to get an A, I would have to write something fairly intelligent in my paper, and in order to do this, I would have to read the story and understand it. But here I was, stuck on the second sentence.

I started over and read on, figuring perhaps that it was only one sentence among many and hoping that the context might clarify it. What I found was that it was only one sentence among many. On the first page, there was (and is) one sentence as short as fifteen words. The others are significantly longer; a few are longer than and at least as grammatically complex as the second.

I realized that getting an A was going to be tough. In order to understand the story (although I didn’t know it at the time), I was going to have to embrace James’ style, and he’s a wizard of the compound, complex, periodic sentence, making his style not only difficult, but also somewhat archaic.

If you look at the sentence I’ve cited, you’ll see that it
difficulty of his style, over anybody's handbook, any
day. Some may disagree, but I say his stories are
much more pleasant to read than are discussions of
subjunctives and commas. And they may teach just
as effectively. For all its particulars, I suspect my
experience is common. Those of us committed to
learning, read often and learn literary lessons in the
process.

Therefore, if we're going to be writers, we must be
readers. Moreover, we must read sometimes with our
minds trained not merely on the information we may
extract from a text, but on the ways that information is
presented. In short, we must read like writers. People
generally do this
subconsciously and learn a
rule here, a trick there, and
acquire some knowledge of
written language in a
manner similar to the one at
work when we first learned
our spoken language, by an
often mysterious process of
osmosis.

Acquiring the ability to write
proficiently , however,
is a
climb, a steep one for a good
share of our students. They
come to college largely
inexperienced as writers and
as readers who are not
committed to their literacy. It's a cultural thing that we
don't need to rehash here. The foundations for
making writing an integral part of a higher education
have not been completed before our students begin
their college careers. Freshman composition can only
do so much, and despite our best efforts, fear and
loathing sometimes undermine our work. Many
students say, "English just isn't my thing." But we
can't wring our hands; we have work to do.

Even when we do all we can and are expected to do
in composition courses, students need more—which
is precisely why we have an Across-the-University
Writing Program and writing-enhanced courses in all
disciplines. As their writing contexts change, students
need to learn anew (as does everyone—through

has the following major grammatical features. It is
made up of two independent clauses, joined with a
semicolon where they could be separated with a
period. Perhaps James joined the second to the first
rather than separating it, because it is, in effect, a
continuation of the first; James clarifies why the “he”
in the story had been conveyed to the house. The
second main independent clause, “the party of
visitors at the other house . . . had been invited over
to luncheon,” is interrupted at my ellipsis here by three
embedded appositive modifiers; the “of whom” clause
and the “and thanks to whom” phrase, which is itself
interrupted by the third phrase, “as always.” Both of
these appositives
describe the party of visitors
named in the main clause.
After these interruptions,
James supplies the main
clause's predicate. This is
characteristic of James' periodic style.

But I'm probably boring you
with all this grammatical
hoo-ha. Suffice it to say that
I kept my mind set on that A.
And as I recall, I got it. The
result was that I learned
about the mechanics of
writing from Henry James
that semester, and for that, I
blame my teacher. (You may
too.) Specifically, I learned about relative and
nonrelative clauses, appositive phrases, and other
forms of grammatical embedding, as well as learning
how to use semicolons, commas, parentheses,
dashes, and other punctuation marks to manage
grammatically complex sentences.

But I'm not telling you all this to be self-congratulatory;
what I know about grammar is not important to you.
However, there are lessons in this for all who teach
through writing, lessons that reflect what we may
already feel, if indeed we're not conscious of them.

One lesson of my experience reading James is that
grammar handbooks can easily be replaced. I'll take
Henry James (choose who you will), for all the
application) how writing principles apply in the new context.

In certain respects, all of our classes are language classes, especially (though not exclusively) our writing-enhanced courses. We introduce our students to the languages of our disciplines as we teach them the concepts, information, and ways to appreciate the field or operate in it as professionals. Our composition courses can teach students general rhetorical, stylistic, and grammatical lessons, but the applications must be left until students are in specific situations.

All of us combined do not have the time or energy to teach every principle of written communication until they are learned by each student. Students rarely care to think about such things, especially grammar. Still, students know that they are held responsible for their own learning (no matter how unreasonable that may seem to some). Therefore, we can try to smuggle such education into our students’ experiences. They don’t have to know the language of linguistics or rhetoric, and you don’t have to teach it. They don’t have to think about grammar and rhetoric as long as they notice. We can tell them what to notice.

Encouraging students to read like writers does not have to involve much time or effort, then, though it can. I am not suggesting that everyone teach “The Beast in the Jungle.” But if assigned reading material exhibits basic facets of writing important to you or stylistic and formal features of the way people in your discipline write, facets or features you expect students to exhibit in their writing, alert them to this. And if you choose, discuss it in class along with the subject matter conveyed, identifying it and explaining why it is important to students. (Sometimes, style is substance.) But do not expect the discussion to translate immediately into refined, conventional writing. Understanding precedes practical application.

Students do need to learn to write, or they’ll suffer the consequences. Miraculously, however, the brain is wired for language, so even poor writers are endowed with an amazing capacity to learn language. But this learning is a slow process, as our observation of children should tell us. And it is agonizingly slow for those who have fallen behind. To aid this learning, we can focus students’ attention on immersing themselves in literacy. Because of the capacities they have already developed, we can alert students to the principles of written communication we want them to understand in their reading and coax them to apply the principles in writing.

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY
CONTEST WINNERS

Darren J. Pierson (graduate level)
“The European Defense Community:
The French Agenda”

Marie Gray (300-400 level—research paper)
“Forced Adjustment of Cultural Norms:
The Desegregation of Public Schools in Conroe, Texas”

Jean Teale (300-400 level—essay)
“Europe’s Legacy of Change”

Keith West (300-400 level—essay)
“European Anticipation of the Twentieth Century:
A Critical Essay”

Kristy McCormick (300-400 level—honorable mention)
“Europe in Transition:
The Turmoil of the Late Nineteenth Century”

James Weber (300-400 level—honorable mention)
“The Scramble for the Future”

Winnie Bowers (200 level)
“Law Codes of the Ancient World”

Shelly Knapp (200 level)
“Social Status of Muslim Women”
WHO LEARNS MORE—STUDENT OR PROFESSOR?

Dr. Charles R. B. Stowe
Associate Professor
Department of General Business
and Finance

After a weekend at Waterwood during the Across-the-University Writing Program Retreat, I was ready to implement a writing component in General Business 362, Business Law. Selfishly, I figured that one more burst of creative energy would revolutionize my teaching! Well, like most things in life, the “revolution” has its costs as well as its benefits. After injecting a series of assignments into this semester’s course, I surveyed my students. I think I may have learned more than they did!

Here are some “lessons learned” from my first attempt.

What worked:

• Frame the assignment to address a “real” audience. Instead of asking students to answer an academic question addressed to a “teacher,” I decided to ask students to respond to memos from “management.” Students liked the idea of responding to a memo; it made the assignment seem less theoretical and more practical.

• Make the assignment open book and in class. Is it any surprise to you that my students hate homework? I gave two in-class and two homework assignments—both open book. My students want open book, in-class assignments. What does that say about my brilliant lectures?

What I need to work on:

• Focus more on content rather than spelling, punctuation, and so forth. Students want to know if they have the correct idea. In the future, I will give two grades per assignment: one for content and the other for writing.

• Give feedback quickly. Since I used a series of memos building on one fact pattern, I made a mistake by not having each assignment fully graded before they started the next one. Oops!

• Set up the background information so that students identify what they have just read as applicable to the given fact pattern. It takes much more time to write a business memo that challenges students to apply a legal concept than it does to write a true-false or multiple-choice question.

• Take a survey on how to improve the learning value of the written assignments. The student surveys were very helpful. I now know that I must provide feedback immediately following the assignment, be flexible in grading answers that are “creative,” and continuously improve my instructions. The dual grade system will permit me to encourage good spelling and sound content.

Is it worth the extra work to offer written assignments? Yes. Most students responded that the series of memos forced them to apply vague legal concepts to business reality. The student survey also reaffirmed my contention that our students do really care about quality of teaching.
In spring 1991, I made some general changes in my evaluation of student performance, examinations, and grading. I made these changes in order to have a more comprehensive and quantitative evaluation of how much each student has learned. I have also developed an evaluation sheet for in-class examinations, take-home examinations, and term papers, so as to give the students a better understanding of how I rated their performance. The evaluation criteria and score sheet for in-class essay examinations are as follows:

### Evaluation Criteria for In-Class Essays

1. **Pertinence**: Does the essay directly address the question? Is there a significant effort to answer the question? (10 points)

2. **Analysis**: Is the focus of the essay maintained? Are the points or topics clearly conceived, presented, and discussed? (10 points)

3. **Content**: Is the information presented to substantiate points and topics accurate and clear? Do the facts contribute evidence to the arguments presented? (10 points)

4. **Organization**: Is the essay composed in a clear and logical manner? Is there an introductory statement, a body of evidence, and a conclusion? (10 points)

5. **Mechanics**: Are the fundamentals of paragraphing, sentence structure, grammar, spelling, and punctuation followed? (10 points)

### Evaluation Criteria for Identification Items

1. **Identification**: Is the item fully identified and defined (who, what, when, where)? (5 points/item)

2. **Significance**: Is the historical significance of the item clearly stated (why, how)? (5 points/item)

### Score Sheet for In-Class Examinations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Essay Section</th>
<th>Identification Section</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Criterion #1</td>
<td>Ident.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criterion #2</td>
<td>ID #1 [<em><strong><strong>] + [</strong></strong></em>] = _____</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criterion #3</td>
<td>ID #2 [<em><strong><strong>] + [</strong></strong></em>] = _____</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criterion #4</td>
<td>ID #3 [<em><strong><strong>] + [</strong></strong></em>] = _____</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criterion #5</td>
<td>ID #4 [<em><strong><strong>] + [</strong></strong></em>] = _____</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essay Total</td>
<td>ID #5 [<em><strong><strong>] + [</strong></strong></em>] = _____</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combined Score</td>
<td>Identification Total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In evaluating student performance and assigning grades, I have attempted to maintain a good balance between assessing how much students have learned and how well they have developed their skills in historical interpretation and writing. To make the course more writing-enhanced, I have at times had a policy including optional or required take-home examinations and essays in my lecture courses. The evaluation criteria and score sheet for take-home examinations and essays are as follows:

### Evaluation Criteria for Take-Home Exams and Essays

1. **Coverage of Subject**: Be sure that your essay directly addresses the question. The focus on the question should be maintained throughout the essay. Points and/or subtopics should be clearly conceived, presented, and discussed. Make a significant effort to cover and reiterate the question or essay topic in the conclusion. (30 points)

2. **Organization and Form**: Your essay should be composed in a clear and logical manner. If your essay is a narrative essay, events should be covered in a clear chronological outline. If your essay is analytical or descriptive as in the case of the dialogue, your points should be presented in a logical sequence which enhances your general argument. Make certain that your essay has an introductory statement, a body of evidence, and a conclusion. (30 points)

3. **Writing and Mechanics**: The writing style of your essay should be clear and concise. Your essay should be written in proper English and address the prospective audience of educated laypeople. Be sure that each paragraph leads logically into the other and that all terms, events, people, and other items are adequately defined. Be certain that all information is properly documented. Make sure that you follow the fundamentals of paragraphing, sentence structure, grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Be certain that you have maintained proper margins and form. Have your essay carefully proofread for mechanics, organization, continuity, and transition. (20 points)

4. **Notes**: If you directly quote your sources or use information from one source only, please include notation. Cite all notes at the end of the text or at the foot of each page. Each book source cited should include author, title, place of publication, publisher, year, and page number. Articles and essays cited ought to include author, article/essay title, publication title, volume and/or issue number, year, and page number. Abbreviate a source noted more than once with the author’s name if it is the only work by that author cited. (20 points)

### Score Sheet for Take-Home Examinations and Essays

**Essay Score:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coverage of Subject</td>
<td>30 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization and Form</td>
<td>30 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing and Mechanics</td>
<td>20 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>10 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>10 points</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**COMBINED SCORE:** _______ out of 100 points

**GRADE:** _______

**COMMENTS:** ____________________________________________

I hope that these evaluation criteria and grading forms will be useful to others in planning courses.
I THINK; THEREFORE, I WRITE

Tony L. Talbert
Lecturer
Department of Curriculum and Instruction

AIDS, nuclear holocaust, environmental pollution, deforestation, ozone depletion, world hunger, human rights violations—what do all these social ills have in common? They serve as ideal critical thinking scenarios to inspire, promote, and implement critical thinking through an ISSUES AND PROBLEMS INQUIRY WRITING FRAMEWORK (IPIWF). Issues, which are challenges to beliefs, and problems, which are challenges to actions, allow the student to explore three necessary components that stimulate critical thinking: evidence, reasoning, and value claims.

As educational reformers and social studies pioneers, we must teach our students by using methodologies to promote problem solving and inquiry skills that develop social activism in the form of serving in civic or political office, working for public interest groups, writing letters, researching and publishing, and deliberating and debating public policy issues and problems. John J. Cogan states “that active participation as adult citizens begins in school when students and their teachers become active participants in the society” (Cogan, 1989). Therefore, teacher education and social studies programs must provide students with inquiry models that develop critical thinking skills and help students find order in the world and solve problems (Maxim, 1995).

The IPIWF successfully facilitates the student’s academic enrichment and the instructor’s assessment of this growth. By implementing this writing model, the student explores several issues and problems of professional and content-specific significance. The following should provide the instructor with the necessary information to implement the IPIWF. After selecting and researching issues and/or problems, such as nuclear disasters, the student prepares one IPIWF, no more than one page, for each of four topics. Then the individual provides each classmate with the IPIWF copies and delivers a ten-minute speech on the findings.

To encourage more extensive research and writing, the student then selects two of the topics presented in the IPIWF model and develops two ten-page position papers. By utilizing this format, the insightful instructor can manage the paper load by quickly assessing the framework’s content and analysis, while thoroughly grading the writing style, form, and grammar. However, the ultimate payoff is exposing the student to an effective research and writing framework that develops critical thinking through the research, writing, and discussion of selected issues and problems.


Any graduate who does not understand how the body of knowledge is created is one that the academy has cheated. Such a person is one who “knows” what he or she “knows” from the socialization process, personal experiences, and instruction. Yet, most of the knowledge that is transmitted is facts and concepts. Little attention is directed toward teaching/learning how to create knowledge and to use existing knowledge.

All political science majors and minors must complete the course, Research and Writing in Political Science. The course goals are to teach students to 1) write correctly, 2) write with precision, 3) experience “new” methods and systems of thinking, 4) grasp how the body of knowledge is created, 5) prepare a research proposal for submission to a funding agency, and 6) understand that political science is science.

Attainment of the goals requires compliance with writing rubrics and the standards of research design inherent in proposal construction. Writing rubrics help students focus on organization of thoughts, vocabulary, sentence structure and grammar, and mechanics including verb tense regularity, spelling, and punctuation.
The research proposal has nine sections. It takes approximately a month of activities (which involves discussing the scientific method, reading political and social science literature, annotating sources, writing abstracts, observing human behavior, and formulating hypotheses from the observations) before the students are “crudely” ready to begin construction of the proposal.

What do students obtain from this semester-long experience? The answers are many. As in a first photography course, students learn to “see” through a wider angle lens (the mind enriched by the scientific method in this case). This is a course in which intellectual growth is observable. As students become aware of their growth, a satisfaction pervades the class/community. Also, the new knowledge is transferable to the tasks in other classes. A benefit not heretofore noted is increased mastery of the library. The efficiency they acquire in unlocking the secrets of locating resources through paper and on-line indexes and Internet is of lifelong benefit.

The work load for this class is the heaviest in the department. Class size must be limited because the instructor will read and comment upon each research proposal five or more times. Is it worth it? Absolutely, for both instructor and students! Only after this course do students know the discipline/profession about which they have a passion.

**TEACHING ABOUT VIOLENCE**

Dr. Mitch Roth  
Assistant Professor  
College of Criminal Justice

In the fall of 1994, I had the good fortune to participate in the SHSU Across-the-University Writing Program’s weekend retreat at Waterwood. Not only did I win a door prize for the first and second times in my life, but also I came away from the seminar with valuable suggestions for improving the quality of the writing-enhanced courses that I teach.

This semester I am teaching two writing-enhanced courses, one of which is entitled Violence in America, which examines the social, cultural, and political proclivities of Americans toward violence during the past two hundred years. One device I am experimenting with is the use of journal writing. Students are responsible for recording their entries on a daily basis. This has already proved a valuable assignment for not only practicing writing techniques but also providing the students with a tool of reflection. In each entry students are required to record their daily brushes with violence.
What becomes most apparent to the students is how integral violence is to their daily lives. Many work in the correctional system and have firsthand impressions of every type of physical and psychological violence. Others read newspaper accounts of violence, witness fights in cowboy bars, or have assaulted or been assaulted themselves. Many reach an epiphany where after twenty or thirty entries in their journals they realize how many violent television shows and movies they watch, for in the end this form of entertainment is the one from which they draw most of their insights. A not uncommon acknowledgment is “I never realized how much violent entertainment I watch.” This becomes even more apparent when I give them the task of listing ten serial killers, which most are able to do with great aplomb. Then I ask them to name ten Nobel Prize or National Book Award winners, which I must say is greeted with more quiet than the western front at the end of World War I. Students then reflect on why they are more familiar with multiple killers who have become virtual twentieth century icons. This in itself is a valuable lesson to all, including this professor.

The downside to this assignment is that it is obvious that some students write their assignments all at once, shortly before they are due. I have been able to discern various attempts at subterfuge. Some students vary the color of ink for each passage, as if this will convince me that they were done on alternate days. Others will draw most of their inspirations from one sitting with a run of newspapers, a likely hunting ground for current incidents or issues dealing with violence. However, I feel journal writing has been one of the most successful techniques gleaned from the Across-the-University Writing Program, and I recommend that all faculty members experience this program.

**WRITERS' RECEPTION**

Tammy Musselman
Chair, Academic Affairs Committee
Student Government Association

On Tuesday, April 18, approximately one hundred and twenty-five individuals attended a reception honoring student and faculty writers. The Student Government Association and the Across-the-University Writing Program Committee sponsored the event in the Evans Complex. The Honorable Jane Monday, Regent, The Texas State University System, spoke on the topic, “Writing Awareness: Opportunities Often Overlooked.” Along with hearing her presentation, participants viewed a display of student papers and faculty publications.

To determine which students to invite, each faculty member was asked to submit one or more names of outstanding graduate or undergraduate student writers. A total of one hundred and twenty-six individuals were nominated. In addition, faculty who teach English 164/165 were asked to submit the best freshman compositions to a panel of judges. The nominees’ names are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lacey Arnold</th>
<th>Becky Graham</th>
<th>Misty McCants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tyler Coker</td>
<td>Angela Holmes</td>
<td>Robert Stanley Phillips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrea Dones</td>
<td>Jana Jackson</td>
<td>Tara Reed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tara Driskell</td>
<td>Kenneth S. Lamb</td>
<td>Christine Slagle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christopher Dunn</td>
<td>Vicki L. Lee</td>
<td>Jeremy Sullivan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Garrett</td>
<td>Allison Lindeman</td>
<td>Kristi Watson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashley Gibson</td>
<td>Matt Martin</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Of the twenty compositions, Vicki L. Lee’s “The Overuse of Ritalin for Behavior Modification” was selected as the best freshman paper for 1994-95. She received a plaque from SGA and a $100 award from Sigma Tau Delta, the English Honor Society. Ms. Tracy Bilsing nominated her. The second and third place winners, John Garrett and Ashley Gibson, nominated by Ms. Linda Byrd and Ms. Tracy Bilsing, respectively, were each given plaques and $50 prizes. Plus, Jeremy Sullivan and Becky Graham won honorable mention awards. Dr. Ruth Bryant and Ms. Linda Byrd submitted Jeremy’s and Becky’s papers. Judges for the competition included Dr. Bill Fleming, Division of English and Foreign Languages; Dr. Teri Lesesne, Department of Library Science; Ms. Lee Pappas, Department of History; Dr. Katherine McFarland, Department of Language, Literacy, and Special Populations; Ms. Tammy Musselman, Student Government Association; and Ms. Catherine Corman, Sigma Tau Delta.
The overuse of Ritalin for behavior modification

Vicki L. Lee
Winner, Best Freshman Composition Award

There is a little known drug war being fought, and our society’s youngest members stand to be the possible casualties. These children are not being threatened by unknown pushers on school campuses or on the streets. They are being threatened by professionals that are diagnosing a disorder that is easily misunderstood and treated with a drug that is still held in question. Diagnosis and treatment of this disorder is a very controversial topic in the medical and educational fields.

The disorder in question is attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, also known as ADHD. ADHD is caused by a slight chemical imbalance of neurotransmitters in the part of the brain that regulates attention, impulse control and mood. It affects more than eight percent of the world’s population (Barry 6). There is little research that determines the cause of ADHD or the appropriate treatment of children suspected of having the disorder, and researchers disagree with the results available. Some conclude that a difficult or premature birth is responsible, while others point to genetics. Some researchers are still investigating the possibility of a biological explanation for this disorder (Black 31).

Identifying a child with ADHD is at best an arbitrary, subjective, and uncertain process (Black 32). The American Psychiatric Association guidelines state that the following three criteria must be met before a diagnosis of ADHD can be confirmed. First, the child must display inattention, impulsiveness, and hyperactivity that is inappropriate for his age. Second, the symptoms must be present for no less than six months. And third, eight of the possible fourteen types of behavior must be present. Some of the possible types of behavior are as follows: fidgeting or squirming while seated, becoming easily distracted, having difficulty waiting for a turn, talking excessively, or losing things needed for activities. The fact that the guidelines state the child needs only to display any eight of the fourteen kinds of behavior discloses the level of knowledge in the field (Black 32). Both the low level of knowledge in diagnosing the disorder and the physicians’ practices pose serious problems.

A child’s teacher is most often the first to label a child as “hyperactive.” In many cases the teacher’s judgment is the single measure for diagnosis. Studies have shown that when no other measures are added, such as the observations of parents and pediatricians, the number of children diagnosed and labeled hyperactive is much higher. Clinicians must investigate the case completely. Relying on a school’s referral and a brief office exam of the child will not give an accurate picture of any attention disorders. A child will most likely act differently in a classroom setting than in a doctor’s office (Black 32-33). The child’s home life must also be investigated. This presents yet another problem in diagnosing.

Families are not always willing to delve into their own private emotional lives, and in most cases physicians need this input for an accurate diagnosis. Parents do not always want to look at what is really happening in their home. They just want something to happen quickly. Therefore, the physician is not always able to decide whether a child is responding to a very dysfunctional family or whether a child is making a family dysfunctional (Bass 1). The difficulties in diagnosing the disorder may contribute to the high number of misdiagnoses.

Robert Davis, a psychologist in Baton Rouge, believes that not every child diagnosed with ADHD is a true victim of the disorder.

I believe it is grossly over diagnosed and we have too many children on medication today who are really victims of poor parenting. Disruptive behavior disorder occurs when a child is not properly socialized or parented and the symptoms can be similar, but the treatment should not be the same (Anderson 1).
Dr. Massan Hassibi, Director of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at Metropolitan Hospital in New York City, states in his interview in the *Boston Globe* that many children are diagnosed for disorders whenever they are only unhappy about problems at home or school (Bass 1). The Texas Education Agency claims that Ritalin may be too strong and poor hearing or stress at home could cause ADHD ("Ritalin" Channel 2 News).

Once a child has been diagnosed with ADHD, treatment is usually a combination of drug therapy and counseling. The intent of the drug is to help the child focus. Medicated children are still active, but better able to concentrate, stay on task, pay attention, and get along with teachers and their peers (Black 31). The most popular drug used for behavior modification is Ritalin (Barry 6).

Ritalin, a central nervous system stimulant, restores the chemical balance in the brain, minimizing the undesired effects of ADHD (Anderson 1). Ritalin is a brand name for Methylphenidate, a schedule II drug which is in the same class as morphine and barbiturates. Schedule II drugs are regulated by the Drug Enforcement Agency because they carry the highest potential for abuse (Black 33). The *Physicians’ Desk Reference* states that there is no sufficient data to ensure the safety and efficiency of long term use of Ritalin in children ("Ritalin" 880). But in 1992 about 750,000 United States school children received Ritalin. Experts suggest that the estimated number is now well over one million, making Ritalin the most widely prescribed psychoactive medication for children (Bass 1).

There are many concerns about the use of Ritalin to modify a child’s behavior. First, the physician must not only investigate the child’s behavior patterns at home and school before diagnosing, but also he must carefully monitor the child once the youngster has been placed on the drug. Unfortunately there is a frightening number of reports that physicians are prescribing medication without any further contact with the patient. If the physician does not receive any reports of negative effects, the child may be left on psychostimulants for as long as six years without a trial withdrawal period (Divoky 601).

Second, there are some very disturbing side effects. ADHD patients taking a psychoactive drug are at a much higher risk of later drug abuse (Anderson 1). Richard Hawley, headmaster of University School in Ohio, declares that any psychoactive drug interferes with the learning process and indiscriminately affects the maturing brain (Divoky 602). The most distressing side effect is that children on the medication are not given the chance to learn how to control their feelings or impulses, and are therefore forever drug dependent (Bass 1).

Finally, society’s acceptance of the use of Ritalin is a growing concern. Society is not only accepting the use of mind-altering drugs to make children conform to expectations, but some are also demanding it. In 1988 New Hampshire upheld the decision of Derry school system that a nine-year-old student must take Ritalin in order to receive a public education. The student was dismissed from school until his parents agreed to put him on a regimen of Ritalin. The student’s parents refused and took the case to federal district court because they believed that their child’s constitutional rights to privacy and liberty had been violated by the state’s pro-drug ruling. The child lost a full year of education and is now at a private school while the battle is being waged (Divoky 599).

Children who are properly diagnosed and their treatment carefully monitored could very possibly benefit from Ritalin. However, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder is complex, and Ritalin has a high potential for serious life-altering side effects. With these concerns in mind, parents, teachers, physicians, and society as a whole need to learn more about ADHD and Ritalin and possibly “just say no.”

**WORKS CITED**


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