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JACOBSON CENTER TELEGRAM



SPECIAL ISSUE: ON THE HANDBOOKS

Issued in early fall and spring, 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.

We've set a pattern of conversation at the Jacobson Center that's going to dominate for the foreseeable future: We talk and talk about AI and all the ways we need to adapt to its pressures, and we talk and talk about pens, pencils, and paper and all the benefits they provide. How the two come together still feels unclear. These conversations have gotten me thinking about our handbook Writing Papers, the last copy of which we've handed out. I'm wondering, with so much on the web, and now AI, is it worth revising and, more critically, reprinting a handbook? Is a little book, locally written, revised, and printed, still relevant and useful?

The first Smith writing handbook in my collection is called the English 11 Handbook 1957-58, written by The Staff of English 11. The earliest copyright date on the imprint page is 1943, so it's probably not the first published handbook. The 1957-58 edition starts this way:

We want to make this course not only one of the most valuable in college, but also one of the most interesting; and to that end we need the cooperation and the hard work of every student. We cannot promise that English 11 will be an easy road to travel, nor do we wish to do so. To many, if not most of you, its first months may seem difficult and discouraging.

Local voices of the time, local values. Unpalatable language by today's standards. The book goes on to discuss matters of correctness and style, documentation, and The Smith College Library. The section on intellectual honesty offers some advice from Professor Baldwin (no other identifying information): "Phrase is as strictly private as its author's purse—use without quotation is theft." The English 11 Handbook 1957-58 cost 75 cents.

The first handbook titled Writing Papers in my collection is from 1981, a revision of a 1980 edition, written by Joan Garrett-Goodyear, Betsy Harries, Doug Patey, and Margaret Shook. It is not associated with a particular course and provides greater coverage of the writing process. It starts this way:

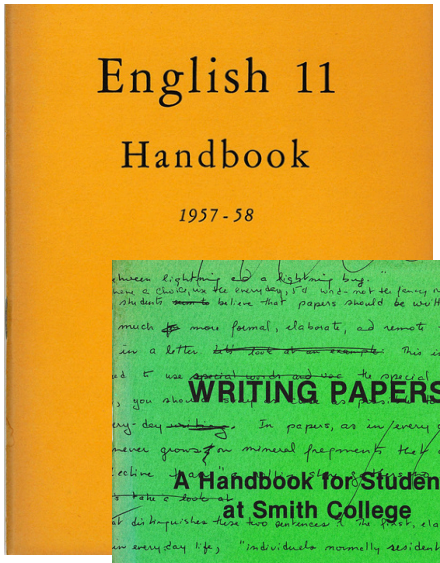
Good writing is difficult, but not mysterious. While we can't turn all students into great writers or great stylists, we hope that this handbook will help you write clear, correct, and forceful prose. Writing takes practice and hard work. But, unlike genius it is all perspiration; it does not depend on intuition or inspiration. Good papers are made, not born.

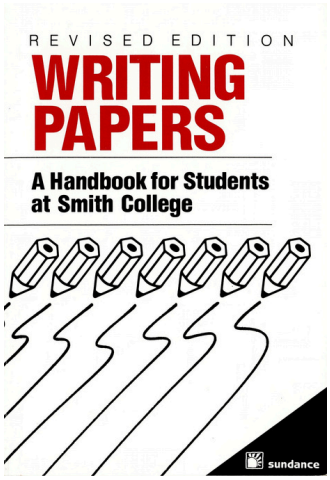
UPCOMING EVENTS

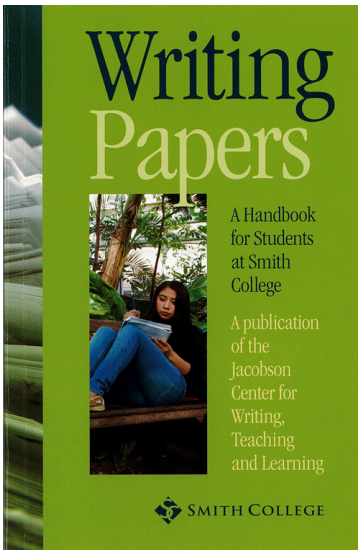
10/21, Seelye 301, 4:30pm
Noteworthy: How to Take Notes You Can Use
Ren Llewellyn

11/4, Seelye 301, 4:30pm
Test-Ready: Studying, Test-taking, & Testing Anxiety
Ren Llewellyn

11/18, Seelye 301, 4:30pm
Speak Out: Presenting, Participating, & Speaking With Confidence
Peter Sapira







Though written by English faculty, this expanded handbook was no longer attached to a particular course. Reflecting the values of writing across the curriculum, it had input from the then director of the writing center and faculty in different divisions, including government, economics, and chemistry.

The second revised edition came in 1986. This was the first edition that looked more like a book than a pamphlet: glossy cover, more colors, glued binding. It cost $1.

In the early 2000s, the Jacobson Center took over the revision of Writing Papers and created a new version from scratch, though still using the same title and some examples from the earlier editions in homage to the earlier work and for continuity. I contributed to this edition (I was the multilingual writing specialist then) and a librarian wrote the section "Researching a Topic." This was the third revised edition. This and all future editions were available for free at the Jacobson Center.

As director, I oversaw the revision and publication of the fourth and fifth revised editions. In the preface to these editions, I paid homage to the earlier work and noted how technologies had changed for college writers since the handbook's first edition. I also noted that our goals remained the same: "Students today, like the students of twenty-five years ago, need to be able to reason clearly and articulately and express themselves in clear, concise, even elegant prose." I noted how previous generations of students still contacted the Jacobson Center asking if we were still publishing the handbook and if they could have a fresh copy.

The most recent edition, the first to have a cover photograph of a real student taken by a student photographer, expanded the coverage of writing in STEM. I noted there how technologies had changed even more and more rapidly but that our goals were still the same. In the age of AI, however, I wonder how that is still true. What does it mean now, for example, for students to "do their own work"? Should we undertake a fresh revision of Writing Papers, we'll need to tackle that interesting question among others, emphasizing, as always, local voices, local values. But, given the amount of information available on the web and via AI, is a handbook worth revising, and, if so, is it worth printing? Have we handed out the very last material vestige of a venerable Smith tradition?

—Julio Alves, Director

Have a response? Let us know here!

PERSPECTIVES

on how handbooks support writing

Margo Audero '26

Mastering the numerous rules and conventions of academic paper writing can be a challenging endeavor for new and experienced college students alike. The Jacobson Center's *Writing Papers* handbook assists students with each aspect of this endeavor, making it an invaluable resource for all Smithies.

The handbook's basic structure mirrors the process of writing an academic paper, beginning with the "pre-writing" phase and progressing through the draft, revising, editing, and polishing phases. Each section contains tips, tricks, and step-by-step guides for different parts of paper writing, such as creating a thesis or choosing between active and passive voice. The "Revising" section even has comprehensive grammar and punctuation guides, with example sentences to show how revised grammar can improve clarity and flow in writing. An additional section of the handbook focuses entirely on writing a research paper, with Smith-specific information on how to locate online journal articles and obtain access to resources the Smith library doesn't own. Style guides and instructions for the major citation styles are also included.

During my time as a peer writing tutor at Smith, I often provided students with a copy of *Writing Papers* to supplement our one-on-one tutoring sessions. Students frequently referenced the section on choosing a thesis and crafting a thesis sentence, as well as the sections on specific grammar and punctuation rules. Multiple students noticeably improved their writing after attending tutoring sessions and studying the handbook.

The act of writing academically promotes nuanced and critical thinking, which is now more important than ever. *Writing Papers* is an indispensable companion for Smithies as they strengthen their minds and prepare to enter the world.