The Journal of Creative Library Practice

The Writing Blitz: Engaging Students Through a High-Impact Hybrid Event

September 17, 2025 *Peer-Reviewed Article*

Alexandra Boris
Social Sciences Librarian – University of Tennessee

Kat Brooks
Collections Strategist – University of Tennessee

Sarah McCarter
Student Success Librarian for Professional Literacies – University of Tennessee

Erin Elizabeth Whitaker
Student Success Librarian for Information Literacy – University of Tennessee

Abstract

The Writing Blitz is a long-standing high impact event held by The University of Tennessee, Knoxville Libraries. The original event was in-person, however, due the COVID-19 pandemic we transitioned to hybrid format to continue to reach students in the most accessible way possible. We will discuss how we managed an event in a hybrid environment and maintained relationships with crucial campus partners. In Fall 2023, we surveyed students and assessed perceptions and preferences for hybrid events. This article will outline the planning stages, execution, assessment, and our challenges and successes for delivering a hybrid engagement event.

Introduction

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK) Libraries hosts a paper writing marathon in partnership with the Judith Anderson Herbert Writing Center (JAHWC) each semester. This event, the Writing Blitz (WB), provides access to writing tutors, reference and instruction librarians, and support materials to students in a curated, late-night environment. This article details the history and development of the event, and explores themes highlighted by a 2023-2024 assessment project.

Background/History

The WB was originally inspired by the long-standing and popular UTK event “DeStress for Success.” DeStress provides support for students during their intensely stressful final exam season via a focus on wellness activities. Late-night reference librarians noted a similar need for additional support during times when First-Year Composition (FYC) classes often have papers due. The WB became one way to fill that gap, as it aimed to

provide as close to everything a student needs to write a paper in one place as possible. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the event was adapted to an online format. Due to positive feedback from participants and volunteers, the online component continued when campus reopened; the event has since been a hybrid event. Each year, operational and anecdotal feedback from participants and facilitators is incorporated into planning and conducting the event, leading to changes small (adding tea to the beverage selection) and large (expanding to additional locations). In 2023, the organizing librarians conducted a study to gauge student preferences for the event, understand the demographic of students attending, and examine feedback trends.

Literature Review

Libraries and writing centers have been partnering on projects for many years. Palomino and Gouveia (2010) found that having the writing center and research assistance in the same accessible location helped students with their anxiety over writing and research. In a 2018 study by Richardson, 65 percent of respondents reported having partnerships and collaborations with their respective writing centers. With these partnerships, the event becomes a “one-stop” shop to help students with term papers. Cooke and Bledsoe (2008) discuss different methods of teaching writing and research together, and potentially training writing center tutors how to research to help build complementary skills to use when helping students with writing, while Epstein and Draxler (2020) discuss the option of embedding writing and research tutors in first-year studies courses.

As to research on hybrid instruction and tutoring, there has been extensive research on this topic since the COVID-19 pandemic. Within those articles, there are many studies to choose from that discuss student preferences, some even showing students preferring in-person or hybrid options for instruction (Garba et al., 2024; Nikolopoulou, 2022). Studies have also been conducted on how libraries and writing centers collaborate in virtual and in-person environments. Julia Stone (2024) researched libraries and writing centers to see what collaborative services they offer in different environments. The top three ways they collaborate virtually and in person were with tutoring sessions, tutorial creation, and student orientations or trainings (Stone, 2024).

Similar events to UTK’s WB can be found across other institutions; one such event is “Long Night Against Procrastination” at European University Viadrina in Frankfurt/Oder, Germany which is an eleven-hour overnight event that provided services, refreshments, and exercises to keep students active and productive (Datig and Herkner, 2017). However, there is a gap in the literature regarding the organization of similar events in a hybrid environment that utilizes both in-person and online formats.

Event Overview

The planning and execution of the WB involves determining a preferred date in the semester, space reservations, catering requests, distributing marketing materials, and communication write-ups for both within the Libraries and campus-wide. The Libraries in conjunction with the JAHWC work diligently to market the event to students, recruit volunteers, and plan out the details accordingly to ensure a successful event.

Spaces are thoughtfully chosen and designed to create an atmosphere that facilitates learning and writing. With two adjoining classrooms at the end of a hallway, the setup provides a quiet study space and a group study space with librarians and writing tutors available for students. Over the years, the event has been held

in multiple locations throughout the library and the team found that this setup produced the best conditions for a paper writing marathon.

Food is a common theme in outreach and engagement events given that it attracts students to participate; however, this has become a staple for the WB due to the awareness of food insecurity on college campuses. Catering requests for coffee, tea, and water are made in advance through the Libraries' business office accompanied by individually wrapped snacks and fruit that are bought the day before the event. This small but powerful gesture creates a positive association when students think of library-led events and incentivizes them to attend again.

Marketing materials have remained consistent throughout the life of this event. Collaborating with the Marketing team, the posters and social media posts use the same design every semester to create a brand that students begin to recognize over time. Organizers disseminate the marketing materials to bulletin boards and digital signs across campus. The use of the same materials, along with holding the event in the same space of the library, has enabled organizers to create a signature event that students expect to see each semester.

Communication is one of, if not the most important component of this event. It consists of a two-fold approach: communication inside the library and outside to the campus at large. Communication inside the library is focused on informing the Public Services team, who manage the building, about the event to direct students to the right location, and to recruit volunteers to help with the event. Logistically, this event covers a wide range of time and requires many volunteers. There are typically around ten volunteers from the Libraries and over thirty tutors from the JAHWC split between the two physical locations and online. The WB team provides a variety of modalities to volunteers allowing people to lead from where they feel most comfortable.

Volunteers can choose to serve in-person or online via Zoom due to the hybrid nature of the event. The volunteer sheet is divided into one-hour blocks to accommodate all kinds of schedules and to encourage as many people as possible to volunteer. As one of the leading high-impact practices in the library, the Writing Blitz is a prime opportunity to meet students where they are with access to reference librarians, writing tutors, and late-night snacks. The communication aimed outside of the Libraries is all about telling our story to the campus community and creating buy-in to guarantee a successful event. This communication consists of the marketing materials discussed previously as well as featured stories in either the library magazine or campus newspaper. The more buy-in that is generated will increase the chances of word-of-mouth marketing, encouraging more students to attend.

Execution of this event is straightforward and includes setting up the reserved rooms, refreshments, a check-in table, and swag options. Both librarians and JAHWC tutors arrive beforehand to set up their own check-in tables, and resources. Displays featuring the survey QR code are posted around each room and down the hallway to provide as many opportunities as possible for students to engage with the survey. A staff member is designated to be at each check-in table to help navigate students to the best resource for them. Tutors and librarians are posted around the area so that they are available for students whenever they need assistance. As students filter through, a designated employee keeps track of the number of people in attendance for assessment purposes. Volunteers also move in and out of the space depending on their availability. The event starts at 4 p.m. (and ends at 10 p.m.) and typically experiences a rush of students at the forefront with attendance tapering off after the first couple of hours. As the night progresses, Libraries staff continue to monitor the needs of the students, writing tutors, and volunteers.

On Zoom, this process looks similar, with students signing on and then being assigned to breakout rooms with either a librarian or tutor to assist them. Sessions can be as short as fifteen minutes or as long as an hour. When students leave the event, they are encouraged to take a few minutes to complete the survey or take a snack with them. This event relies on its iterative and sustainable nature. Librarians and tutors can focus on helping the students with what they need most and provide a positive experience with the library and its resources.

Methodology

In order to study the functionality of a hybrid engagement event, and to gauge participant interest in continuing that event model, the researchers developed a short anonymous survey. Participants were asked two demographic questions and five "topical" questions:

- Are you an undergraduate, graduate, or other student?
- Did you work with a librarian or writing center tutor?
- What is your major/area of study?
- What project did you work on today?
- In the future, which of these options would you prefer for this event?
- What did you find the most helpful about this event?
- What comments or suggestions do you have about this event?

[See Appendix A]

Paper surveys were distributed on-site and a Google Forms digital option was accessible via a TinyURL and QR code to attendees in the virtual environment as well as in the physical space. The survey was available on October 18, 2023, during the time of the event, and the online form was closed the following morning. Participants were notified of and directed toward the survey during the event. Paper surveys were available on a table separate from event staff to ensure privacy and confidentiality for participants.

Four surveys were submitted through the online form and five were filled out on paper, totaling nine responses. While a small overall number, this represents a response rate of 23% (out of 39 total attendees). For analysis, the paper survey responses were compiled into the Google Forms output to utilize the built in visualization capabilities of Google Sheets. We then reviewed the data to identify trends and themes in the survey responses. Due to the small data pool, researchers were able to analyze the data without additional cleaning or processing software or extensive qualitative coding methods.

Findings

While it was anecdotally noted by facilitators that graduate students did attend the event, and sought help from tutors, the entirety of the survey responses self-identified as undergraduate students. No faculty or staff were reported officially or anecdotally as participants apart from those assisting with the event. This aligns with the marketing strategies used for this event which focused on the undergraduate student population and students working on First-Year Composition coursework. The respondents represented four majors/areas of study – business (5, 55%), education (2, 22%), engineering (1, 11%), and data science (1, 11%). Respondents were split via online and in person with four online attendees and five in person.

Services Utilized

The survey also found that most students (7, 78%) worked with JAHWC tutors rather than librarians (see Graph 1: “Did you work with a librarian or writing center tutor?”). A variety of factors are suspected to impact this distribution. Perhaps most directly, students are often able to receive extra credit or tutoring credits by meeting with JAHWC tutors, with this event included as an option. The JAHWC generally has more traditional operating hours, so for some students, this late night event may be their best opportunity to interact with writing tutors, whereas the Libraries research assistance service is available 24 hours throughout the semester. The Libraries’ research assistance has seen many evolutions throughout the time following the Covid-19 pandemic. Due to this, students may have less familiarity with the service and their knowledge of at what point in their writing process it would be helpful to consult with a librarian. While the spirit of the event is to bring both services together for students during their point of need, this distribution does highlight an opportunity to further investigate the potential factors involved and develop strategies to connect with students.

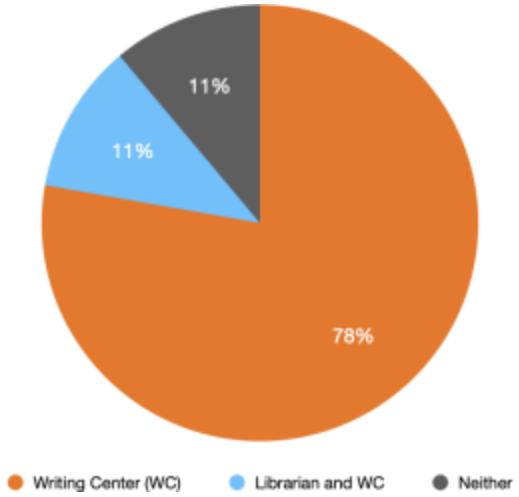


Fig. 1: “Did you work with a writing tutor or a librarian?”

Discipline Representation and Area of Study

Business majors, either in marketing, finance, or accounting, represented the largest group of participants (5, 55%). Other disciplines in attendance were Education, Engineering, and Data Sciences. A diverse mix of majors is to be expected, as First-Year Composition (FYC) courses are required of all students and are not generally geared toward or grouped by any certain major and FYC students are the primary audience of the Writing Blitz marketing strategy.

Furthermore, 55 percent (5) reported working on assignments from the FYC courses: a qualitative research paper, an archival paper, or an academic position paper. Outside of the big three FYC assignments, students also worked on an annotated bibliography and a conclusion for a debate analysis annotated bibliography (DAAB), which are both assignments scaffolded into FYC instruction.

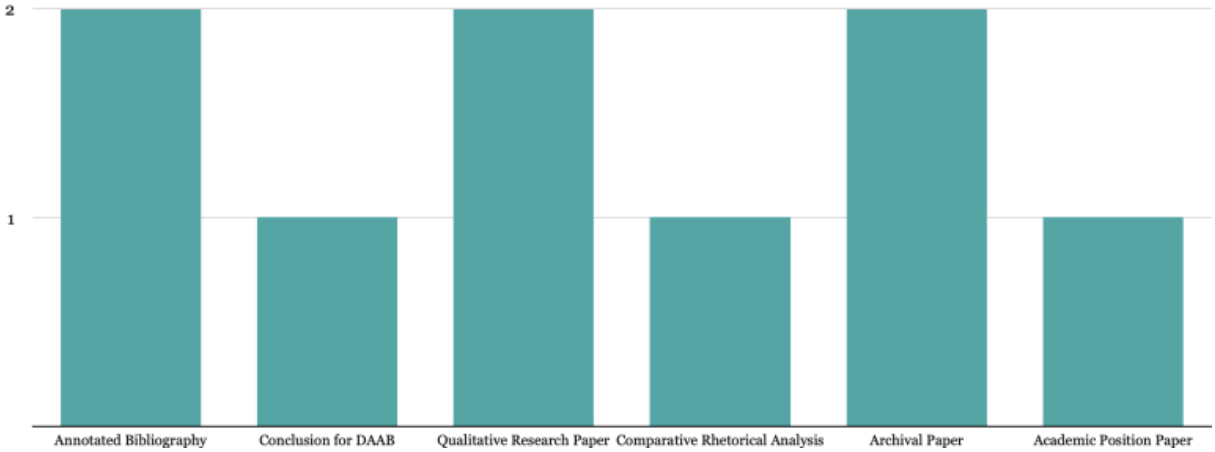


Fig. 2: What project did you work on today?

Preferred Format

Seventy-eight percent (7) participants stated they preferred in-person. However, at least 22 percent (2) of participants said they would like to keep the event hybrid. No responses indicated a preference for online only, despite four out of the nine responses being online attendees. Since the question was framed as "Which of these options would you prefer?", a heavy emphasis was placed by participants on the in-person environment. Two respondents indicated a preference for in-person despite attending online. However, the impact of having the option of online seems worth the effort of hosting the hybrid event.

Participant Feedback

Throughout the responses for the questions "What did you find the most helpful about this event?" and "What comments or suggestions do you have about this event?" students expressed appreciation for the ease of access ("As soon I showed up, someone was ready to help me") and the one-on-one support ("It was nice to talk through ideas"). Multiple students asked for this event to be offered more than once a semester. Others noted they liked working with tutors and librarians who understood their assignments and what was expected of them for the course. The biggest takeaway from this survey was that students appreciated having people ready and available to help them with their assignments, whether in person or online, and hoped the event would be continued in the future.

Discussion

Librarians and JAHWC tutors create a space that centers itself around mutual compatibility. Services provided by our practitioners work in harmony with one another, and that is felt through the back and forth of referrals between the two services. Sometimes the two co-work together with students to understand their true needs and help accordingly. Due to the fluidity of our service model, it is hard to determine at what stage students are requesting help for each particular service, but as noted in the survey results students are more often seeking help from JAHWC tutors. This collaboration is discussed further in the successes section.

This event brings together two powerhouse services offered at UTK in one venue, and provides support to students both in person and online (i.e. Zoom) to ensure a more equitable learning environment. To the best of our ability, the Zoom component acted synonymously with the in person option, including a landing page offering a brief introduction and access to the survey along with staff ready to help students check in to the

event. We also had breakout rooms ready for one-on-one consultations. Having these set up from the beginning ensured the event ran smoothly. With all technology, there are usually technical difficulties; for instance, only having one host for the Zoom room, the internet not cooperating, etc. However, when looking at the event holistically we did not view these as challenges, but rather reflective of the age we live in now. Those who wish to create a similar event must prepare the best they can, and remain flexible to quickly act on what needs fixing in the moment. With that said, our event did have its challenges and its success and are discussed in the following sections.

Challenges and Strategies

Recruiting volunteers from available librarians can prove difficult because of the hours of the event. While librarians at UTK have considerable schedule flexibility, many choose to work during traditional business hours. Since the event is held in the middle of the week, some are reluctant to stay late, as they might have full schedules, or have early obligations the next day. Overcoming this challenge required the original organizers to open the event up for others across the Libraries to participate. This not only applied to paraprofessionals and other library staff members but also graduate student library workers. The hybrid format also helped with this aspect in that it allows both tutors and librarians to work from where it is most comfortable for them, be that in the library, at home, or elsewhere.

Student attendance and engagement were other areas that benefited from the hybrid format. Like Libraries volunteers, students can also attend the event from wherever is convenient and comfortable for them. For in-person participants, organizers offer snacks, coffee, and Libraries swag. If nothing else, these materials are eye-catching and draw more students to the event. For students enrolled in ENGL 103 and ENGL 104, co-curricular writing courses in the First-Year Composition program at UTK, “tutor meeting credit” is offered to students who attend the Writing Blitz. As requirements for these courses, students must meet with tutors in the JAHWC a certain number of times each semester. Credit for attending the Writing Blitz incentivizes students by giving them course requirement credit to meet with a tutor during a time when the JAHWC is not usually open. This flexibility allows them to meet this requirement on their own time.

Figuring out when to hold the event has gotten more difficult in recent semesters, since UTK no longer has a “set” midterms schedule. Furthermore, students in writing courses will inevitably have papers and projects due at different times throughout the semester. No one time for this event could ever serve the entire student body in terms of when their assignments are due. However, we have taken some steps to ensure that we are catering to as many students as we can.

Firstly, we polled our partners. Librarians worked together with the JAHWC to determine when the most students would benefit from the event. The tutors at the JAHWC have an understanding of the due dates for assignments, particularly in ENGL 101 and ENGL 102 (the First-Year Composition courses at UTK) since tutors regularly meet with students about these assignments. These tutors also regularly meet with students because of ENGL 103 and ENGL 104, which are co-curricular courses offered in the FYC program in which students get course credit for visiting the JAHWC. The tutors offered valuable insight into the busy times of the semester and gave librarians an idea of when would be best to hold the event.

Next, librarians looked at assignment due dates directly. As liaison to the First-Year Composition program, the Student Success Librarian for Information Literacy has access to the FYC Canvas and the ability to study sample/example course outlines and syllabi; thus, librarians know when many or most FYC instructors will require projects and papers be turned in. Instruction librarians also looked at the timing of requests from

instructors for library instruction sessions. We assumed this because instructors were requesting sessions, papers, and projects that relied on knowledge of library resources were required. We also implemented a trial-and-error approach. By trying out different dates at different points of the semester, librarians got a sense of when would be the best time to hold the event.

Successes

This event has helped the Libraries create and sustain a close relationship with the JAHWC. By having both librarians and tutors present at the event, the two groups not only work in concert to assist students with their writing and research but also exchange ideas and information about the students they are working with. This helps both tutors and librarians know better what students are working on and what resources they need.

The most important goal of the WB is student success and helping students. Based on our survey results, students find the event valuable and are appreciative of the help they receive. One student wrote: “I am glad this event occurred, and I would suggest it to anyone looking to get help on any type of writing.” This response suggests that not only did the student get the help they needed, but they would also recommend the event to their peers.

The Writing Blitz also helps us meet students where they are. One student reported, “As soon as I showed up, someone was ready to help me. They got straight to work, which I appreciated.” This student responded positively to the promptness of help they received. This means that we were able to meet the student’s needs at the moment most helpful for them. This has long been a primary goal of libraries and librarians. Because of the hybrid nature of the event, distance students are also able to participate, allowing the Libraries and JAHWC to assist students even beyond campus. Overall, there is no way of knowing if the event was more beneficial in person or online since there is no way of knowing the impact the event had on a students’ grade, assignment, etc. However, we can see that the students had a positive experience all around—in person and online—and received the help they needed, fulfilling the goal we set out to achieve.

Conclusion

The Writing Blitz at the University of Tennessee found success in promoting and running an event in a hybrid setting. Findings indicate that because of the hybrid nature of the event, librarians, tutors, and students have the option to participate in ways that work best for them. It can be concluded that this makes for more engagement across the board and more participant satisfaction, which inevitably will affect the longevity and impact of the event. From this, the investigators can conclude that, the more accessible the event, the more impact the event creates.

While there is still more research to be done on the effectiveness of hybrid events, this study aims to encourage other professionals to continue hosting hybrid options for events which, in turn, creates more accessibility for students who do not live on campus, cannot make it to the in-person event, or are in distance education classes. Giving these students the ability to join in a hybrid environment, as shown by the findings, indicates this gives students relief that they are not missing out on opportunities simply because they were unable to attend in person.

Bibliography

Cooke, R., & Bledsoe, C. (2008). Writing centers and libraries: One-stop shopping for better term papers. *The Reference Librarian, 49*(2), 119–127. https://doi.org/10.1080/02763870802101310.

Datig, I., & Herkner, L. (2014). Get ready for a long night: Collaborating with the writing center to combat student procrastination. *College & Research Libraries News, 75*(3), 128–131. https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.75.3.9086.

Epstein, M., & Draxler, B. (2020). Collaborative assessment of an academic library and writing center partnership: Embedded writing and research tutors for first-year students. *College & Research Libraries, 81*(3). https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.81.3.509.

Garba, S. A. (2024). Excuse me, Sir, must the class be online? Students on-campus putting faculty on the defense after the pandemic: the search for justification and preference. *Educational Administration: Theory & Practice, 30*(3), 2299–2307. https://doi.org/10.53555/kuey.v30i3.4364.

Nikolopoulou, K. (2022). Face-to-face, online and hybrid education: University students' opinions and preferences. *Journal of Digital Educational Technology, 2*(2), ep2206. https://doi.org/10.30935/jdet/12384.

Palomino, N. E., & Gouveia, P. F. (2011). Righting the academic paper. *New Library World*, *112*(3/4), 131–140. https://doi.org/10.1108/03074801111117032.

Richardson, B. (2018). Collaborations between libraries and writing/tutoring services are diverse and provide opportunities to support student success and information literacy outcomes. *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice*, *13*(3), 91–93. https://doi.org/10.18438/eblip29452.

Stone, J. (2024). Shifting to the online environment: Exploring virtual and in-person collaborations between community college libraries and writing centers. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship, 50*(5), 102902. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2024.102902.

Appendix A: Writing Blitz Survey Questions

1. Are you an undergraduate, graduate, or other student?

    a. Undergraduate
    b. Graduate
    c. Other

2. Did you work with a librarian or writing center tutor?

    a. Librarian
    b. Writing center tutor
    c. Both
    d. Neither

3. What is your major/area of study?

4. What project did you work on today?

5. In the future, which of these options would you prefer for this event?

    a. In-person
    b. Online

6. What did you find the most helpful about this event?

7. What comments or suggestions do you have about this event?

This site uses Akismet to reduce spam. Learn how your comment data is processed.