

# JACOBSON CENTER TELEGRAM



## NEWS & DEVELOPMENTS

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.

**I start with an appeal to faculty.** Our annual surveys indicate a high level of student satisfaction with the writing center. Students appreciate the opportunity to meet with professional writing instructors by appointment and the flexibility of the drop-in services with peer tutors, especially in the evenings and on Sunday. They find the Jacobson Center and the Learning Commons welcoming spaces and appreciate the feedback they receive, which they overwhelmingly say helps them become stronger, more confident, less anxious writers.

In our most recent survey, 81% of students strongly agreed that their papers were improved as a result of using the Jacobson Center, and 90% agreed or strongly agreed that their writing abilities overall also improved. In their comments, students spoke of specific benefits both to their writing and to their socio-emotional well being.

But here's the thing: In fall 2024, we saw only 605 discrete students in Seelye and in the Learning Commons. (We had many more appointments than that, of course, due to repeat visits.) We'd like to increase that number but need faculty help to do that. Why? Because—unsurprisingly—we've also learned from the surveys that faculty play the single most important role in encouraging students to visit the writing center. In the last survey, a whopping 30% of students said that they heard about the writing center from their professors. No other means of outreach comes even close.

So here's **the appeal** to faculty: **Please encourage and remind your students to use the writing center—verbally in class and in writing in your syllabi and assignments.**

By offering students the opportunity to have constructive, nonjudgmental conversations with writing experts about their writing, writing centers empower students to approach writing as a process, not just a product, a dispositional shift that will greatly benefit them as scholars and lifelong writers.

—Julio Alves, Director

## SPOTLIGHT



"Rapture and Repair"  
by Kyona Hernandez '24

The Jacobson Center has acquired this and other student artworks with the help of a grant from the Office of Equity and Inclusion, as part of our Racial Justice Action Plan.

## UPCOMING EVENTS

4/9, Neilson Library 011, 4:30pm  
**Public Speaking Workshop**  
Peter Sapira

4/16, Campus Center 102, 4:30pm  
**Writing Anxiety Workshop**  
Sara Eddy & Ren Llewellyn

# COMMENTARY

## *Science Journalism as Radiant Attention*

Jaime Green, Lecturer in Writing & Public Discourse

Science writing bears a heavy burden these days. (I promise not to talk about “these days” too much.) But it can also lighten us. In a recent interview with the New York Times, the author and science journalist Ed Yong, who won a Pulitzer for his 2020 Covid coverage, said that the underlying project of all of his work is “the idea that much of the world is hidden from us, that we don’t perceive it and don’t understand it, and that it is worth understanding and it is necessary to understand.” Yong’s books are not about pandemics or infectious diseases; they’re barely about humans at all. His most

recent book, *An Immense World*, is about the alien realms of animals’ senses; his next, *The Infinite Extent*, will be about the living beings that “thrive at the edges of space and time, geography and longevity.”

In the Times, his interviewer posed an admittedly curmudgeonly question about the value of writing and learning about all the “magic that’s happening all around us at any given moment.” He likened this awareness to carrying around a pretty balloon. He marvels at the balloon, but soon enough, real life gets in the way and —POP! Does understanding “the bigger existential stuff” actually help when we’re struggling?

Yes, Yong said. Wonder and joy don’t erase despair, but they can balance out and insulate us against it. He pointed out

that science “is one of the only areas of human endeavor that take us out of ourselves.”

I think this value, while present in reading and learning about science, is especially present in writing about it. Writing about scientific research for the public—whether we are journalists or researchers ourselves—turns us into conduits for these meaningful experiences. Not just conduits, even, but amplifiers, using our intellectual understanding, our creativity, and our empathy to offer that experience to our readers. The informative power of science writing is vital—now more than ever, I’m sorry to say—but we should never lose sight of the meaning that science can bring to our lives, the value of, as Ed Yong says, “radiating your attention outward.”

## PERSPECTIVES

*A.I. Use and the Devaluing of Learning*  
Margot Audero '25,  
Peer Writing Tutor

In the fall of 2024, I began teaching conversational English to young women in Afghanistan. Three years earlier, in 2021, the Taliban had regained control of their country, instituted a violent, oppressive regime, and banned education for women and girls beyond elementary school. By attending my virtual lessons, students risked the safety of themselves and their families. Because of this, you can imagine my utter confusion when I started to recognize the distinct cadence of A.I. text generators in the spoken responses of some of my students. Why risk so much to pursue an education, only to let a computer algorithm think and learn for you? I eventually arrived at a simple yet subtle explanation for this phenomenon: Many students are more concerned with demonstrating their knowledge than expanding it, and A.I. conveniently assists with the former at the expense of the latter.



This explanation helped me better understand the motivations of A.I. users in Afghanistan and at Smith College. It is no surprise that Afghan students would want to appear knowledgeable to their instructors, knowing that positive evaluations could lead to international scholarships and a chance to escape the Taliban. Likewise, it is understandable that students at a rigorous university like Smith would be desperate to receive top grades on essays, believing that a high G.P.A. is necessary to succeed academically and professionally.

There is nothing new about students wanting to exude academic proficiency; what is new is the ability to do so at the click of a button—no thought required. Whether merely receiving assistance structuring a sentence or receiving guidance in the form of an entire essay outline, A.I. robs its users of the challenges which develop students into better writers and thinkers. This problem must be addressed at its source; attempts to merely ban A.I. are unlikely to succeed. Instead, institutions of higher education must be reoriented to both allow and encourage learning, in and of itself.