# JACOBSON CENTER
# *TELEGRAM*

## SPECIAL ISSUE: WORDS & NUMBERS

The right word, the right number

I tell students that all verbs are useful, but that precise, dynamic verbs drive powerful sentences. As a matter of course, why write out an entire dictionary definition when you can reach for a single word at your disposal? If you have no specific reason for writing "walk in a slow, relaxed manner, without hurry or effort," why not mobilize "saunter"? Why write out "touch gently and lovingly" when you have "caress" at your disposal? Students respond well to these writing lessons because they see how much and how quickly they improve their writing, which becomes less wordy, clearer, and more precise

Precision also applies to crafting arguments, I also say, and the invocation of specific numbers can greatly help with that. Here, unfortunately, students don't respond as enthusiastically. For years, my mantra to inexperienced writers about evidence has been that it consists of three mutually reinforcing layers: 1. the opinions of experts (not just quotes but, yes, quotes too), 2. numbers (data), and 3. case studies (which bring the numbers to life and make the argument personally engaging). Students generally embrace the first and third layers, but not the second. The second layer is a harder sell. What students most often reach for is not a specific number but an imprecise verbal placeholder, like many (how many?), most (55% or 99%?), often (daily? multiple times a day? eight times out of ten?). The irony is, of course, that numbers have never been more abundant. A single Google search yields a bounty.

No discipline is immune from the power of numbers as a rhetorical device in making arguments, and none is exempt from helping students use numbers in context. As we know from writing pedagogy, students learn best when the learning is done in context. I'd like to envision a day at Smith when it's just as natural for a student to reach for a number in making an argument as it is for them to reach for a quote. There are ethical concerns in using numbers, of course, not unlike those about quotes. We are familiar with the questions: Where did it (quote, number) come from? Is the source reliable? What was the context? What are all the possible interpretations? But what interests me first is the habit of mind, the impulse, to reach for a number to make a point. Rhetorically, the right number is the perfect pairing to the right word.

-Julio Alves, Director

## SPOTLIGHT
Working Writers returns on April 15th featuring Anna Megill '09

**Writing for Video Games: Not Just Beeps and Boops Anymore**

**Working Writers**
with Anna Megill '09

Wednesday April 15, 2026
5 p.m.
Seelye 201

My father often said, "You will always need math, and you will always need to write." As I progressed deeper into mathematics, I understood that writing carefully was critical for being understood, and as I progressed in the humanities, I found my facility with numbers gave me leverage. Quantitative literacy professionals quip,"The person using numbers will win the argument, even when their numbers are wrong," illustrating the rhetorical power of numbers.

The power of quantitative reasoning is reaching for numbers when they exist, and using them to communicate. Sometimes no math skills are involved at all, just counting. A sentence like "The majority of the sessions were empty" can be rewritten as "Out of the 44 sessions, 33 were empty." The reader could infer the 75% empty-session rate, or the 25% usage rate, but the version with just the counts has enough impact on its own.

The world is awash in data, and quantitative literacy is more important now than it was 20 years ago. Quantitative literacy is comfort, competency, and "habit of mind" in working with numbers. It may involve using mathematics or statistics, but it will always involve number sense, critical thinking, and communication. Developing quantitative literacy doesn't necessarily mean taking calculus or majoring in STEM+. The habit of mind is developed through using different types of numbers and tools, and in writing for different purposes and contexts. Whether you refine your writing while completing a problem set in engineering or reach for data to support your history paper, my father was correct: you always need math and you always need to write.

Data can support writing beyond individual experiences to capture the nuances of a broader truth. When I write about transportation reform, I draw on my knowledge from struggling to access healthcare, social events, and independence as a blind non-driver in an area without public transit. My experiences inform the claim that a transit system monopolized by automobiles is unjust. However, a singular experience does not capture the full breadth of a system impacting millions of people.

To broaden the perspective presented in my writing, I use data. I wrote that the transit sector accounts for 28% of US greenhouse gas emissions, the largest share. A majority of that 28% comes from on-road vehicles. I write that in 2022, 13% of BIPOC households did not own a car, compared to 6% of white households. I write that 1/3 of US residents do not hold driver's licenses. These numbers reveal a larger picture about transportation injustice, showing that a car-dominated system drives climate change, excludes marginalized communities from mobility, and does not work for about a third of the country. Data allows me to create writing capable of capturing the truth of broader systems and, in the process, potentially inform change to these processes.

While writing with data can capture a broad range of experiences, data is a collection of information points, not an inherent truth about the world. Data collection includes decisions about which experiences are excluded, combined, or simplified to enable quantification and capture of information points. Once captured, how a writer presents data influences the reader's perception. For example, the data point that 1/3 of US residents do not hold driver's licenses includes children. I find this data point important to writing about transportation reform, because children still need to be mobile and, like everyone else, deserve a system that supports this mobility. Providing a complete context for the information a data point captures gives you a chance to justify your use of data and, through this justification, further your point.

Some questions I ask myself when thinking about how to write with data include the following:

- What are you writing about, and how does data further this argument? What broader experience are you trying to capture with data?
- Who or what does the data represent? Who and what is excluded and why?
- What is your audience meant to take away from the data? How have you contextualized the data in your writing so that your audience gets this takeaway, while also receiving the full context of the data?
- How do your biases impact how you understand and present data? How are you presenting these biases to your audience?