

BEST WRITING PRACTICES FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS: REDUCING THE DISCOMFORT OF THE BLANK SCREEN

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Abstract

With support and guidance, graduate students can successfully pursue academic writing for publication. In graduate circles, academic writing is presumed to be a solitary activity for which students already are prepared. Yet, the reality is that students tend to find academic writing difficult and stressful, and they often look to university faculty members for guidance. Faculty members, in turn, may provide hands-on practice and other classroom support in an effort to teach writing, even though they have had little or no instruction on how to do so. In this article discussion is provided of what researchers say about writing, challenges of teaching writing, and writing ideas and strategies.

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In graduate circles, academic writing is presumed to be a solitary activity for which students already are prepared. Yet, the reality is that students tend to find academic writing difficult and stressful, and they often look to university faculty members for guidance. Faculty members, in turn, may provide hands-on practice and other classroom support in an effort to teach writing, even though they have had little or no instruction on how to do so (Thomas 2005).

Helping students become competent writers is always a challenge, and educators continually should seek out new ideas and approaches. I concur with Stevenson's (2006, 1080) position in her essay on the teaching of writing: "With regard to current curriculum design, it is doubtful that one 'best' method exists." Recent research provides insights into university classroom applications and suggests some fundamental best practices of teaching writing to graduate students across educational disciplines. Both university faculty members who teach graduate-level writing and graduate students can benefit from a review of these techniques.

What Researchers Say about Writing

Graduate students are novice researchers and writers who must be initiated into the culture of academic writing. The importance of graduate students learning academic writing is a given; in fact, Stevenson (2006, 1080) argued, the "need for writing has never been questioned." Nonetheless, researchers of graduate writing have been building a rationale for why students should develop a facility with writing and have highlighted the benefits of doing so (e.g., Mullen 2005; Richardson 1994; Scardamalia and Bereiter 1986; Stevenson 2006; Thomas 2005).

Like their younger counterparts, graduate students need to demonstrate high-level skills in reading comprehension, thinking and reading critically (as in knowing how to identify various rhetorical structures and

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to distinguish between what should be said explicitly and implicitly), and communicating with particular audiences for specific purposes. They also should know how to collaborate on writing, how to use technology, and how to write for specific genres, both professional and academic. Educational studies of the young student (e.g., McCallister 2004), college student (e.g., Stevenson 2006), and graduate student (e.g., Mullen 2003) all agree that writing activities are the key to developing these wide-ranging skills.

Two decades ago, Scardamalia and Bereiter (1986) claimed that adult students would be able to keep pace with the rising expectations for scholars and practitioners only if they gained the necessary competence in writing. Facility not only with the written language but also with research-based writing skills has become the norm, even for doctoral students who are teachers and leaders (Mullen 2005). Doctoral students must know how to write well; moreover, those applying for academic positions in research universities should be equipped with publication records (Cassuto 1998). Arguably, publication should not be thought of as an esoteric activity reserved for “the elite”; rather, as Thomas (2005) described, writing and publication are expected performances for academics, much like playing a musical instrument and performing at a concert are for musicians.

Unfortunately, the topics of graduate writing and its instruction have been relegated to the periphery of the literature, including the most current educational texts on critical thinking and learning. Further, much of the research on graduate-level writing focuses on how to produce an exemplary dissertation or how to achieve publication (e.g., Henson 1999). Virtually overlooked are the steps involved in developing as a writer or as a teacher of writing. In addition, research is only gradually emerging that treats the graduate classroom as an arena for academic writing (e.g., Bolton 1994; Mullen 2005; Richardson 1994; Thomas 2005).

The Challenge of Teaching Writing

University faculty members in schools of education are central to helping students develop critical writing skills. Faculty members can begin by designing writing programs—not just assignments—that McCallister (2004, 144–45) would classify as “reconceptualized.” These offer democratic models of learning that emphasize “novel and creative thinking” and encourage “questioning, connecting, and reflecting” over “obedience, efficiency, speed, attentiveness, and memory.” A curriculum that approaches writing as a social and cognitive process “positions the student squarely in the midst of the world of things, ideas, history, and people and invites him or her to use writing as a means to participate in that world” (McCallister 2004, 145).

Up-to-date writing programs are necessary for exposing students to the applicable knowledge base, current public discourses, and relevant technologies—all of which are changing rapidly across educational disciplines (Stevenson 2006). Though the opportunity to write and share writing is emphasized in the K–12 context (e.g., McCallister 2004), the importance of creating interactive learning environments for adult writers is gaining recognition (e.g., Mullen 2003; Mullen with Tuten, in press; Thomas 2005).

University faculty members need to determine how the goal of teaching writing fits with broader instructional goals and where it best falls in the sequence of a program’s courses, as this will affect the remaining curriculum. This means that a syllabus probably will not be the only curriculum template needing serious consideration. Importantly, as Thomas (2005) explained and I demonstrate later, the faculty member might find that a most compelling democratic method of teaching writing is the workshop model, wherein the reconceptualized curriculum can be enacted. Students write with purpose and by making choices, and the professor focuses not on lecturing and providing packaged lessons, but rather on sharing—as part of the group—ideas and feedback directed at the learners’ needs.

A major aim of faculty members who teach graduate-level writing involves seeking productive ways to engage professionals in writing academic papers on contemporary topics. Kuh (1999) suggested that when high-level performance is modeled, positive learning is more apt to occur. Accordingly, writing programs rooted in a workshop context have been known to foster high-level performance, growth, and success (Thomas 2005). The workshop environment is a place where the craft of writing is modeled through doing, including hands-on activities and in(ter)dependent projects in various stages of the writing process (Mullen 2005; Ray and Laminack 2001; Thomas 2005). Writing teachers such as Mullen, Thomas, and Stevenson, who have investigated their own teaching, have concluded that structure, combined with flexibility, promotes student success. In master’s and doctoral courses approached as workshops, students have been known to produce action studies of considerable complexity, some of which appear in the literature (e.g., see the special issue

of International Journal of Educational Reform, Mullen 2004).

In the workshop environment, after the faculty member covers the guidelines for assignments, students are invited to share how they tackle academic writing. In these early conversations, students often do not readily identify explicit, well-honed writing and research strategies; instead, they may flounder. Despite the years of writing experience students bring to advanced study, they frequently express uncertainty about inquiry as a learning process. While they can talk about reflective and explanatory writing, when it comes to social science inquiry—the educational paradigm that blends science and art and combines reflection with analysis and evidence (e.g., Miles and Huberman 1994)—they struggle, seemingly as fledglings, to grasp new territory.

Once the areas that need to be addressed are identified, the hard work begins—and not just for the students. Thomas (2005, 1) confirmed that as difficult as it may be to learn how to write, “learning to teach writing may be even more daunting.” Such an undertaking requires significant time and effort, even for experienced teachers of writing and with the application of best practices. However, the creation of a successful student-centered curriculum is likely to emerge from particular instructional characteristics (notably patience, imagination, and flexibility), as well as a nonauthoritarian style and a working knowledge of effective writing practices.

Writing Ideas and Strategies

Faculty members generally can empathize with the graduate student’s struggle to pen ideas. Academic writing is challenging, sometimes frustrating work. Instructors can help by modeling authentic discourse in class—for instance, by revealing personal vulnerabilities with respect to writing. However, this is not enough. Sharing of fruitful ideas and strategies for enabling novice writers to open up and take risks within a group context is also vital.

I share with my new student groups, for example, that I often feel overwhelmed when faced with a new writing project, especially when grants and contracts intensify the responsibility. I then go on to describe the strategies I use for reducing the discomfort of the blank screen and the anonymous critic. In turn, I invite students to share first with a “neighbor” and then with the whole group their vulnerabilities and strategies as developing writers. This conversation sets the tone for a personal learning experience that promises to be highly productive, even exciting.

Here, I open up the pedagogical toolkit that supports university teachers of writing, regardless of a course’s title and content. All the strategies that follow appear in the literature and are among the best practices used in my graduate courses. Though they have been classified in this section, each fits more than one theme.

Developing Identity as Writer

For students to realize that they are already writers, albeit developing, can be empowering. Writing instructor McCourt (2005, 244–45) shared this liberating perspective with his high school students:

Every moment of your life, you’re writing. Even in your dreams, you’re writing. When you walk the halls in this school, you meet various people and you write furiously in your head. There’s the principal. You make a decision—a greeting decision. A simple stroll in the hallway calls for paragraphs, sentences in your head, decisions galore.

The identity of students as writers is not esoteric or far-fetched; rather, this standpoint is relevant to who they are now and who they are becoming. One technique that can be used for encouraging this self-image involves the spontaneous recording of thoughts or feelings about the course itself or a particular exchange; after writing for a few minutes, volunteers share. As an outgrowth of this practice—and on a more sophisticated level—action researchers could keep a learning journal, recording their observations of places or people, reflections on interviews or interactions, and interpretations of data.

Closely related to this notion of the developing identity of the writer is finding a voice. Voice in the academic graduate-level context is not so much associated with an unraveling of self or a process of self-therapy as with a connection to what Stevenson (2006, 1081) described as an “understanding of the social milieu in which [students] write,” which “parallels the ways writing is done in the professional world.”

Creating a Studio Environment

Many students are plagued by procrastination along with concerns and questions about their writing. In

a studio context devoted to writing and sharing writing, students can experience a healthy and productive writing process. Writing instructors can help students new to the social sciences and educational inquiry by providing samples of exemplary writing forms, creating a guide that can be used to satisfy the expectations for rigorous work, and allowing students the time to write in the desired format (Stevenson 2006). Students can easily relate to the work of their peers and find the accomplished writing products of classmates to be especially good samples; the samples also make the task seem less intimidating and more achievable (Mullen 2005).

In an environment fondly referred to as the “writing studio,” my students excel. During a writing studio session, novice writers complete exercises in developing outlines, writing proposals, revising writing, accessing materials online, and learning academic formatting. They also have opportunities to consult with peers and the instructor, and to brainstorm about various conceptual and technical matters.

For my doctoral courses, the writing studio is simply a regular classroom, wired for Internet access; for my master’s classes, the writing studio is in a computer laboratory with word processing and other software. No doubt, today’s college writing studio needs to incorporate the computer and the Internet to foster active learning. The blank computer screen should transform into a productive writing tablet as students access information via relevant Web sites and databases, incorporate that research into their text, and develop a well-supported thesis.

Students should be encouraged to ask their instructor questions about their projects and to request that the instructor read and critique drafts, as well as recommend or even help them obtain relevant materials (e.g., sources, references, databases). The instructor’s feedback also might be sought regarding strategies for including quotes, developing interview or survey protocols, presenting data results and evidence, and creating informative charts.

Using Small Assignments

Small assignment has at least two meanings. First, I see it as a short piece of writing that can stand on its own and supply the “seed” for the “plant,” the larger paper. A good writing assignment for the studio is a review—essentially a thoughtful critique of an article, book, or dissertation on the same topic as the major paper. I encouraged one doctoral student, who decided to write her long paper on low-performing schools and cultures of resilience, to first review someone else’s work on the subject. That same evening, we located a relevant dissertation, starting her on the journey of preparing a small assignment in the area of her scholarly interest. Students respond well to this opportunity to write developmentally on a selected topic while advancing their skills as writer and reviewer.

Second, the small assignment is a tool for managing a larger work by identifying its distinct parts. Lamott (1994) admitted to sometimes feeling emotionally besieged at the prospect of writing a new book. For inspiration, she peers through a one-inch picture frame that she keeps on her desk. Writing becomes possible when she can motivate herself “to figure out a one-inch piece of [her] story to tell, one small scene, one memory, one exchange” (Lamott 1994, 18). Instead of trying to write a novel from start to finish, she constructs a story (e.g., a character’s experience of the sunrise) that is somehow integral to the larger work. She even sets a goal for the number of words she will produce each day on a given subject. Eventually, she weaves together the parts into an evolving whole. Students similarly can find motivation and tame the rigorous demands of a larger work by crafting small segments, such as a description of a setting or group, or a summary of responses to a survey study.

Encouraging Draft Writing

First drafts, according to Lamott (1994, 21–22), are equated with “the child’s draft, where you let it all pour out and then let it romp all over the place, knowing that no one is going to see it and that you can shape it later.” The first draft is the writer’s “channel” for “whatever voices and visions come through and onto the page” (Lamott 1994, 23). Though Lamott’s context is not social science, students are reassured to know that many accomplished writers lack excitement and confidence when approaching the task and that few produce eloquent first drafts. Stevenson (2006, 1080) explained, “Writing is a complex, recursive process that is subject to false starts, trial and error, and constant revision.” Drafting, revising, editing, and review are all techniques used for improving texts; ideally, peer listeners and readers should be incorporated from start to finish.

Young students who have the freedom to exercise choices in content and form are on their way to authentic writing (Thomas 2005). Adult students, however, often function best when they have a sense of direction; so they prepare flexible blueprints in the form of outlines and proposals. In class, students can generate, alone or with coauthors, a brief proposal (one to two pages) serving as a preliminary synopsis of their topic, focus, research question(s), setting, methods, key participants, and references. Depending on the circumstances they encounter as action researchers, proposals may change as they investigate further. Students usually end up with a more focused and coherent study when they plan, brainstorm, and problem-solve with their peers and experts, and use techniques consistent with social science inquiry.

Designing Interconnected Writing

Writing assignments, like Russian nesting dolls, can be designed for interconnection—that is, stacking one inside another. Students who prepare a small assignment then can develop it into a larger work (e.g., action study, literature review), by incorporating additional elements, such as an introduction, research, survey results, and conclusions. A great deal of productivity can be realized within a short period when the “stacking” approach is used.

Instructors enable writing as a process of inquiry when a selected issue is tackled over time and in the form of intrinsically connected assignments. With intermittent feedback from instructors, students synthesize scholarly arguments and references they have been formulating or gathering in the construction of their work. When writing the major paper, students are more comfortable if they have produced small works that, once creatively assembled, are reconstructed into a larger work.

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Scaffolding Assisted Learning

Assisted learning, another best practice of graduate teaching and learning, is grounded in constructivist psychological theory. This strategy entails mastery learning, faculty mentoring, and scaffolding. In assisted learning, the professor provides all the support that students need to learn how to perform a task effectively (Mullen 2006). As students acquire the knowledge, skills, and disposition needed to carry out action research, for example, their independence and interdependence overshadow the constant need for teacher assistance.

Through assisted learning, combined with other components of the writing curriculum, instructors shape students’ behavior from a generalized understanding to the specific ability to write professionally. Students become better prepared academics, even empowered, when they learn about professional writing and the publication process itself. During online studio time, students can search for appropriate publishing venues. Their final, revised works are reviewed not only by faculty committees but also by academic publishers, who may provide additional feedback. Dissemination of students’ work is a concrete goal worthy of attention in the formal curriculum.

Parting Reflection

All the best practices described here support the preparation of students for the world of scholarly inquiry and the demands of high-quality scholarship. Their application can enhance the development of students, as well as their instructors, as both scholars and practitioners. Both instructors and graduate students are encouraged to experiment with these ideas and strategies.

Graduate students certainly are able to learn how to write and disseminate their original works, and they can benefit greatly from the opportunity to learn from a formal curriculum that moves them through the phases of developing an educational study. Institutions of higher education are wise to support university faculty in developing program and policy initiatives that meet these academic goals.

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