Teaching Writing in Graduate School

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Graduate students are typically expected to know how to write. Those who write poorly are occasionally penalized, but little in-class attention is given to help students continue to develop and refine their writing skills. More often than not, writing courses at the graduate level are remedial programs designed for international students and others with significant challenges to writing. In this article, we describe the ways in which we introduced writing into the curriculum of a master’s-level qualitative methods course. We structured the course around a semester-long research project that called for students to work in a team with others to improve both their research and writing. We share the strategies we used to demystify the writing process and encourage improvement, both in the course and beyond.

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A few minutes before class is supposed to begin, most of the thirty students have already found seats in the basement classroom. Many are chatting with their neighbors, unsure what awaits them in this course. The instructors have dragged the chairs from their setup in rows to a large circle to better facilitate discussion. At 4:30 p.m., the faculty instructor begins to speak. Most students immediately become quiet and listen to him. In the corner of the room, however, two students’ conversation begins to escalate. “I can’t believe you’d say that!,” the woman yells. “What do you want from me?”, the man replies. The class’s attention shifts from the faculty instructor to the argument. “I just can’t believe you’d do that,” the woman repeats. She then takes a pie and throws it in her companion’s face before running out of the room. Covered in whipped cream, he pauses before following her out of the room, leaving the students shocked and amused. One of the graduate student instructors passes out a questionnaire. “Okay,” he says, "tell us what happened."

The woman involved in the argument was the other graduate student instructor, and her whipped cream-doused companion was a good-natured colleague in the School of Education. We asked students to respond to a short questionnaire with questions such as “What was the man wearing?”; “About how old was the man?”; and “What did the woman say?” We then engaged the class in a brief discussion and found that students reached different conclusions. We used this activity as a way to introduce observation, one of the foci of this qualitative methods and writing course. This unusual start to class signaled to students that this course would be unlike most others that they had taken in their master’s program.

The mere fact that the course contained a focus on writing sets it apart from most others in the typical graduate school curriculum. Although students in master’s and doctoral programs in education are required to do a fair amount of writing, the expectation is that students already know how to write before they begin graduate school. Instructors of graduate students may assume that students learned basic writing skills during their high school and undergraduate years. However, a visit to freshman English courses will confirm that the focus is on expressing ideas with less attention to how they are delivered. As any instructor can attest, students’ writing

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competencies differ dramatically. Some students submit polished papers; others submit drafts replete with grammatical errors and lacking structure. Even the best writers can benefit from additional practice. However, graduate level writing courses are often couched as remedial courses—only for international students or those for whom writing is a significant challenge. A few institutions have created graduate-level writing courses targeted at all students (see Rose and McClafferty 2001 for a description of a course at UCLA). Following in their footsteps, we introduced a focus on writing into an introductory qualitative research course for master’s students.

Given the limited flexibility within the graduate program, coupled with the need to avoid extending the length of time to degree, creating a stand-alone writing course was unrealistic. As qualitative research relies heavily on strong writing skills, we introduced a focus on writing into this introductory qualitative research course. Many have written before us about the need to incorporate a specific focus on teaching students the skills to conduct qualitative research (Lareau, 1987; Schmid, 1992; Tierney & Lincoln, 1994). For example, Schmid (1992) suggests that instructors of qualitative research courses might have their students develop research skills through the use of individual activities (e.g., conducting an observation during a class period), individual projects (e.g., each student completes a course-long research project); or through the choice of group or class projects (e.g., students work together to research a common topic). While there has been some focus on the best way to teach research methods to graduate students, there has been less attention given to how to teach writing. Just as instructors can provide detailed guidance for the steps necessary to become good researchers, so too can instructors provide the same guidance in helping students continue to develop and refine their writing skills.

We argue that writing needs to be an explicit part of the graduate curriculum. Just as we expect students to master the content of courses, they should also be expected to demonstrate proficiency at expressing their ideas in writing. Many students told us that writing is an overwhelming process that they choose not to think about. In this class, we challenged students to change their approach to writing. We worked to make writing less overwhelming and encouraged them to think about and improve their writing. In this article, we provide a brief description of the course structure and discuss the five goals that guided its implementation. We use this first iteration of the course to demonstrate how writing was integrated into a graduate-level course. Since this course’s inception, we have each taught further iterations of the course, both in collaboration and as solo enterprises. The goal of this article is not to develop a prescriptive explanation of how to incorporate writing into a graduate program; each university and departmental context will have different courses and requirements. Here we provide one example and raise questions that may be useful for institutions seeking to provide more writing support at the graduate level. Throughout this article, we consider the ways in which our practices have changed or remained the same as we taught the course in various contexts.

**Course Overview**

The first iteration of this course was taught in Fall 2007 to a group of Student Affairs master’s students at one research university. We spend some time here describing the structure and requirements of the first course. Applied Educational Ethnography is the sole methods course that students in the Student Affairs master’s program are required to take. In general, these students are anticipating careers in student affairs, and fewer than 10% will pursue a doctoral degree. The course was designed to make students better consumers of research that could be used to improve their practice, as well as teach them how to collect data “on the job” that will inform decision making. Given the focus in qualitative research on writing, this course provided a natural way to introduce writing into the curriculum. The course was designed around a semester-long research project, which asked students to investigate the experiences of first-year students at a major research institution. During the third week of classes, students were divided into groups of five. Each group investigated the experiences of a different population of first-year students, including student-athletes, international students, and students with disabilities. Students relied on their group members throughout the semester for both data collection and feedback on writing.

The course required three papers: the first focused on participant observation; the second required analysis of data gathered through an interview with a student; and, the final paper utilized data collected by all group members via observation and interview. This enabled students to have several pieces of data (at least five interviews and five observations) without requiring them to spend extended time in the field. The purpose was to teach students how to go through the entire research process in one semester—a formidable task—as well as to synthesize their findings into a research paper. We made a purposeful decision to allow the students to collect data in a group, but the final papers required each student to analyze data based upon their own research question formulated at the beginning of the semester.

Given the intensive nature of teaching (and giving feedback on) writing, the course was taught by three instructors: a professor and two graduate students. On the first day of class, we explained that all three instructors had equal responsibility. Ultimately, having graduate students function as instructors proved to be beneficial in a variety of ways. Although the instructors used similar teaching styles, students had the option of seeking outside assistance from any of the three instructors. Some students sought out the professor for outside appointments while others felt more comfortable seeking multiple appointments with the graduate student instructors.
Class readings and discussions focused on both qualitative methods and writing. Students read a range of texts, which contained instruction on how to conduct research and write, along with examples of good writing. Texts that addressed the procedural nature of writing included Howard Becker’s (1986) Writing for Social Scientists and John Trimble’s (2000) Writing with Style. Students also read texts by writers discussing the writing process, including a speech by Nobel Prize winner Orhan Pamuk (2006) and an excerpt from Bird by Bird by Anne Lamott (1995). Texts addressing qualitative research focused on both providing information on how to conduct interviews and observations, along with articles and books that provided models of qualitative research. We used such texts as catalysts to discuss both the research and writing processes. Class discussions focused on all aspects of the writing process, from working on outlines to the nitty-gritty of punctuation.

We continued to teach this course in various forms over the next three years. The professor of the first class continues to use a similar structure of writing support with new graduate students each year. Both of the original graduate student instructors have since become faculty members themselves. The female instructor has solo-taught a version of the course to a group of Master’s students in Student Affairs enrolled at another research university. Although we focus here on a methodology course as an example, the instructors have utilized the basic instructional practices to incorporate writing into many of their graduate level courses. Throughout the rest of the article, we consider what we have learned through various iterations of the course.

Making the Class a Success

The ultimate goal of the course was to demystify both the research and writing processes for students. To accomplish this, we were guided by five goals.

Goal 1: Make research and writing more manageable

Given that the majority of students had never before conducted research, and few spent time focusing on the process of writing, we designed the course with these issues in mind. We broke the research process into manageable pieces and provided scaffolding throughout the semester. The course focused on a semester-long research project. The students’ first two papers, for which they conducted participant observation and interviews, served as the foundation for their final paper. To ease the process of writing the final paper, students relied on their group members to help them collect data. Although all students in each group researched a similar population (i.e., international students), each developed a different research question. For the final paper, they were expected to draw upon the interview data of all group members and were encouraged to use observation data as well.

In another iteration of the course, taught solely by one instructor, students again engaged in group research projects, though with even more scaffolding provided. Before the course began, the instructor determined that the class would investigate the experiences of underrepresented students on a college campus. She generated an interview protocol and submitted it to the campus Institutional Review Board for approval. During the second week of class, students identified various underrepresented populations that they wanted to investigate (e.g., gay male students, Latinos, Muslims). These group projects were designed in much the same way as those in the original iteration of the course—intended to provide support to reduce the stress of the research process.

Just as we provided intensive scaffolding for the research process, we broke the writing process into smaller chunks. Writing assignments were due throughout the semester, but we encouraged students to write their final paper in sections—and well before the final due date. For their shorter observation and interview papers, we asked students to bring two pages of each paper to class the week before each was due. We then used 20 minutes of class time to have students give their group members feedback on the first draft. For the final paper, we set a series of deadlines, beginning three weeks before the paper’s due date. One week, students were expected to bring in a half page summary of their findings. The next week, we asked students to bring in their introduction. In small writing workshops with ten students and one instructor, students read over each other’s introductions and made suggestions for revisions. By breaking assignments into smaller pieces, we encouraged students to spend more time focusing on the process of writing, rather than simply producing a paper the night before the due date.

Goal 2: Encourage students to support each other

In all iterations of the course, students’ research and writing groups served multiple purposes. First, they served to facilitate the data collection process. Second, they created a network to provide feedback on drafts of writing. Again, the ultimate goal of this course was to get students to break their habits of writing papers the night before the deadline. Students were encouraged to submit drafts of writing to their peers to get feedback for revision. Few students shared their first paper with their peers. However, after receiving extensive feedback from the instructors, many sought additional opinions on their remaining papers before submitting a final draft. Time was built into the end of most class sessions to allow students to discuss the research and writing process in their groups. Students were encouraged to continue their conversations outside of class, though few met face-to-face. Instead, group members exchanged drafts over e-mail.

Many students found offering extensive and honest feedback a new experience. The initial feedback that students
gave addressed typos and generally offered vaguely supportive comments. We used extensive feedback on assignments as a model of how to peer edit. In addition, we modeled editing. Sentences or paragraphs were presented to the entire class to review. The instructors asked for comments about the strengths and weaknesses of the text. Then one instructor modeled how he or she would edit the text. The instructors would occasionally join various small groups during the peer-editing activities and provide additional feedback on the review process.

**Goal 3: Focus on all aspects of writing**

The focus on writing was separated into three parts: grammar and punctuation, structure, and APA formatting. The instructors incorporated the three aspects of writing into every class and made comments on each paper with advice in these areas. Grammar and punctuation were addressed during short, 15-minute lessons. Various lessons addressed the usage of a particular punctuation mark, such as the semi-colon, or a grammatical rule. We used examples from the literature and students’ own writing during class discussion as examples of both good and bad writing.

Structuring a paper to build an argument was difficult for most students. To role model the writing process, the instructors brought in their own completed papers as well as ones that were in process. Students were walked through the outlining and drafting process, and instructors discussed the continual revisions that went into their own work. The majority of students admitted that they did not use outlines to structure papers, and most were uncertain how to use an outline to improve their writing. Structural issues were further complicated by the requirement to incorporate data to support an argument, which was a new experience for students. In addition to larger structural issues, students had little practice in varying the ways in which they presented data. Many students relied on block quotes. Students admitted two issues that led to an over-reliance on block quotes. First, the students had difficulty trimming down quotes to present the most important pieces of data. Second, students incorporated several block quotes into a five-page paper as a strategy to limit the amount of text they needed to write. In-class exercises had students experiment with different types of quotes (block quotes, indirect quotes, embedded quotes) to see how each might be used for different ends.

As a discipline, education draws upon the style guidelines set forth in the APA manual. Most of the students had used APA guidelines before but were inconsistent with their mastery of formatting. Specifically, students faced the challenge of presenting data appropriately and writing a bibliography. Many students commented that they had received inconsistent instruction on APA style and identified several previous instructors who had not mastered the requirements. A guest speaker was brought in from the university writing center to discuss the most frequently used APA rules. However, much of their learning took place through feedback on their papers. Comments pointed to specific challenges with APA formatting and encouraged students to use their APA manual for guidance.

**Goal 4: Role model the writing process**

Students confessed that they considered writing a task to be completed, not an ongoing process. They described sitting down to write and stopping when they reached the required page limit, printing the first draft and turning it in as a completed paper. We wanted to complicate the students’ understanding of writing and change their perspective and habits of writing. Moving from task- to process-orientation was time-consuming for all. The students realized that expectations were different when they received their first papers back. Our commitment to the students was that we would return papers in a timely manner (i.e. before the next class session), because we wanted them to incorporate suggestions into their work immediately. In addition, the papers were not returned with grades. Writing and improvement were our goals, not doing the minimum to receive the desired grade. In future iterations of the course, two of the instructors found that not providing grades increased the anxiety levels of students accustomed to using letter grades as a measure of their learning. One of the instructors has since decided to provide a midterm grade for students to use as a benchmark. Another instructor found that she had a difficult time of achieving the initial goal of not providing grades to free students to focus on the process of writing; her students did not respond well to what they perceived as uncertainty. Accordingly, she made the decision to continue to provide lengthy feedback, but also provide letter grades to give students an indication of their ultimate performance. Our goal here is not to argue whether one approach is better than another; rather, we adopted various practices that best met the needs of a particular group of students.

In all iterations of the course, assignments built upon each other. Students were encouraged to consider our suggestions before writing the next assignment. As mentioned before, we also highlighted student work during class. We selected paragraphs or sentences that needed improvement and distributed them to the entire class without the author’s name attached. We had students make suggestions for improvement. In addition, we highlighted examples of student work that demonstrated skill competency and discussed why the passages were effective. In one version of the course, the instructor asked students to read strong examples of their work out loud to the rest of their classmates. Doing so provided recognition of students for their hard work while also educating their classmates about what defines a well-written text. Another instructor identified three to five sentences with errors or stylistic concerns in each student’s midterm paper that could use revision. The instructors reviewed the sentences.
and met individually with students who were uncertain how to address the identified error.

In the first iteration of the course, we brought copies of our own work in progress for the students to critique to help demystify the writing process. Students had the opportunity to read our work and to walk through the stages of writing with the author. The intent was to demonstrate that writing is an ongoing process that requires multiple revisions. Editing, revising and seeking feedback are writing essentials. Although the bulk of the course content addressed issues related to learning methodological issues and strategies, we intentionally created opportunities to discuss writing.

**Goal 5: Invest in the students**

Given that we were asking students to put a significant amount of effort into the course, we felt obligated to do the same. We began preparing the syllabus six months before the course began. During the summer, the three instructors met and developed lesson plans for the first six weeks. Weekly meetings continued once fall semester began, both to discuss plans for that week’s class as well as to develop plans for classes in the future. As the semester progressed, we modified lesson plans to respond to students’ emerging needs.

Students received significant feedback on their writing assignments. To facilitate feedback, and due to the fact that multiple instructors read each paper, students submitted electronic copies of their work. Two instructors read each paper and, using the Comments function in Microsoft Word, made an average of thirty comments on each five-page paper. Comments addressed a range of ideas, including the development of the student’s argument, the use of quotes, and the use of APA. The paragraph in Figure 1 comes from one student’s interview of a first-year student pledging a sorority. Instructors’ comments are included in the margins.

![Sample feedback on student writing. (Figure appears in color online.)](image-url)
paragraph, many of the students in the class showed an overwhelming reliance on the use of the passive voice. Their sentences often relied on forms of the verb to be, such as this sentence from another student’s paper: “Various services are utilized by the student.” Much as the female instructor did with the first student’s comma-ridden sentence, all instructors urged students to avoid the passive voice and rewrite such sentences. The male instructor’s final comment emphasizes the need to provide an outline for the reader to follow. As we emphasized throughout the course, writing involves attention to issues large and small, from structure to punctuation.

Future iterations of the course continued to incorporate significant amounts of feedback on papers. The utilization of graduate students depends upon the university context of each of the instructors. In one version of the course taught solely by the female instructor, students were encouraged to turn in partial drafts of their papers for feedback before the due date. While not all students took advantage of this opportunity, those who did found that their papers improved significantly between draft and final product.

We have found that in courses that are taught solely by one instructor, the amount of time invested in feedback rises significantly. This comes as no surprise given that the number of students does not decrease. Having multiple instructors provide feedback eases the burden as well as provides different points of view for evaluation. Whereas one instructor might focus on providing feedback on how a paper adheres to APA guidelines, another might be more attuned to grammatical issues. Our strengths complemented each other. In addition, while errors in grammar and structure can be identified, multiple perspectives on writing illustrated that a “right way” does not exist.

In addition to extensive and personalized feedback on assignments, we also met with students outside of class to work on writing. Midway through the semester, students signed up for a twenty-minute appointment with one of the instructors to discuss a recent assignment. Students were encouraged to bring specific questions about the course and their writing. One-on-one appointments allowed instructors to respond to the particular needs of students in ways that the larger class did not. In addition to these mandated appointments, several students sought additional meetings with instructors to continue to work on their writing. We also offered a series of optional workshops, which more than half of the students chose to attend. In these workshops, we spent time discussing grammar, APA, and answered other questions that students had.

**Lessons Learned**

Between the three of us, we have now taught several iterations of the course. As is often the case in any course, we have found that some activities are wildly successful with all groups of students, while other activities may fail to connect with a particular class. We continue to tinker with the course structure and content as well as the readings and activities that focus specifically on the process of writing. In general, we have identified a few tenets that shape how we view the process of teaching graduate-level writing.

**Instructor commitment is key**

As we discussed, we taught various iterations of the course—some with a group of three instructors and some that were solely run by one instructor. Each configuration has its strengths and weaknesses. With a team of instructors, students are exposed to a variety of writing styles and approaches to writing. In addition, having multiple instructors evaluate papers reduces the workload on any one individual instructor. There is certainly additional demand placed on the instructor solely responsible for course instruction. However, in some respects, we have found that having just one instructor reduces the potential confusion for students, particularly in terms of conflicting advice about writing mechanics and style. We maintain that the number of instructors does not matter. Rather, what we have found to be more critical is that each instructor needs to recognize the greater demands inherent in teaching a writing course and be invested in helping students improve their writing.

**Schedule the course as early as possible in students’ programs**

Although we maintained high expectations in every iteration of the course, students generally appreciated the rigor and focus on writing. Many suggested that the course would have been helpful during their first semester in the program, as a focus on writing would have prepared them for other courses. While the team-taught course is still being offered during the third out of four semesters, other iterations of the course are being offered earlier in students’ programs. A solo-taught course is offered in the second semester of students’ first year at another institution. By being offered slightly earlier in their program, students have the chance to hone their writing skills throughout the remainder of the program. We recognize that often courses cannot be moved out of sequence, but we urge others who are interested in focusing on writing in their courses to do so as early as possible in students’ careers.

**Incorporate a focus on writing into any course**

We have focused in this article on the ways in which we introduced a focus on writing into a qualitative research methods course being offered to master’s students. However, in every course that each of us teaches, we spend time talking about the mechanics of writing. While qualitative research courses provide a natural outlet to focus on writing, given their focus on thick description, each of us spends time in our other graduate courses addressing
writing mechanics. One instructor encourages her students to submit early drafts of their papers in all courses. She also will occasionally spend time in class explaining a confusing grammar rule, such as the appropriate use of the semicolon. It is clear to us that graduate students continue to struggle with their writing. We maintain that it is our responsibility to help students improve as scholars and writers in all courses.

**CONCLUSION**

From the first day of class, we set and maintained high expectations. Students were expected to read at least 100 pages per week and were almost always working on a writing assignment. Although this amount of work was atypical for courses in their program, students appreciated the class. Many suggested that the course would have been helpful during their first semester in the program, as a focus on writing would have prepared them for other courses. One student’s comment on the end of semester evaluation sums up many students’ experiences in the course: “I learned so much about writing, especially unlearning bad habits and developing/relining good...[The professor] and his graduate assistants were a great team and gave us more feedback than any professors I had.”

Although the course was successful in its focus on both the research and writing processes, there is always room for improvement. In future iterations of the course, we intend to teach students how to conduct a literature review. Just as many instructors assume that students know how to write when beginning graduate school, many make a similar assumption on students’ comfort with the literature review. Our interactions with students indicated that this was not the case. Just as we provided intensive scaffolding for students in conducting interviews, we intend to provide similar assistance in reviewing and analyzing the literature.

With all the demands that instructors face to cover content, writing often gets neglected in the typical course. Faculty may give feedback on the content of papers but rarely have time to help students improve the way that their ideas are delivered. The ultimate goal of this course is to encourage students to think about their writing process and to translate what they learned to other courses and work on college campuses. We hope that students will no longer approach writing as a task to be completed as quickly as possible but rather as an important method of communication that deserves adequate time and energy.

**REFERENCES**


