

Chapter 14

Addressing the Scholarly Writing and Publication Needs of Graduate Students

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ABSTRACT

Although research and writing for publication are seen as important responsibilities for most graduate students and faculty, many struggle to understand the process and how to succeed. Unfortunately, writing centers at most universities do not cater to the research and publishing needs of graduate students and faculty, but instead to course-specific needs of undergraduate students. This chapter aims to describe initiatives undertaken to address the scholarly writing and publication needs of graduate students and strategies and programs for the improvement of scholarly writing and provide insight into the kind of learning that can take place in a university writing center. This chapter may be especially helpful to educators who seek to create services at their own institutions for graduate students.

INTRODUCTION

Across industries, organizations in the U.S. notice that almost a quarter of job applicants lack basic skills and almost a third of the basic skills that are lacking revolve around the ability to write in English (Society for Human Resource Management, 2014). The lack of basic written English skills is noticed by educators in different disciplines in higher education, including sociology (Burgess-Proctor, Cassano, Condrón, Lyons, & Sanders, 2014), engineering (Catana, 2017), veterinary and allied animal health fields (Clarke, Schull, Coleman, Pitt, & Manathunga, 2013), education (Pelger & Sigrell, 2016; Street & Stang, 2008), biology (Hódar, Pérez-Martínez, Morales, Martín-Cuenca, & Iáñez-Pareja 2016), agriculture (Motavalli, Patton, & Miles, 2007), chemistry (Van Bramer & Bastin, 2013), and other fields. What unites these educators is a conviction that “coherent, logical, effective, and even elegant student writing” (Burgess-Proctor, 2014, p. 130) can help students in their academic and professional lives. The workforce needs applicants with the ability to write coherent, succinct sentences in English. Being born in the U.S. is not a guarantee of skills in written English such as preparing reports, presentations, minutes, and correspondence.

While students experience difficulties with writing at both undergraduate and graduate levels, this chapter focuses on graduate students. Graduate students are usually believed to know how to write due to their prior educational and professional experiences (Palmer & Major, 2008; Saltee, Hallett, & Tierney, 2011) and, therefore, receive less assistance from universities and programs with their writing. Contrary to this belief, graduate students’ “papers are written so poorly that their comprehension of the material is difficult to determine” (Ondrusek, 2012, p. 174). Sixty percent of doctoral students have difficulty conducting a literature review and synthesizing that information into a quality dissertation (Switzer & Perdue, 2011). Additionally, when feedback is given to graduate students, they often have difficulty addressing the constructive comments given on their writing (Rocco, 2002). Graduate students are often unable to write for an academic audience or adhere to an academic style of writing and integrate and cite sources (Pfeifer & Ferree, 2006). What makes the situation more serious is the expectation that graduate students should write at a higher level than their undergraduate counterparts, for example, by writing more complex and lengthy papers, synthesizing several viewpoints, providing critique, and creating and carrying out original research projects (Ondrusek, 2012). Despite a deficit in the quality of graduate student writing and high expectations for their writing, little has been done to address the problem.

In this chapter, we discuss writing initiatives undertaken to address the scholarly writing and publication needs of graduate students.

IMPROVING GRADUATE STUDENT WRITING

The repertoire of strategies universities use to improve graduate students’ writing is rather limited. Occasionally, colleges offer, and require students to take, a stand-alone graduate writing course. Street and Stang (2008) described a writing course in a graduate teacher education program that incorporated writing various pieces of work (e.g., brief papers, reports to administrators, and class assignments). These assignments focused on “effective writing, writing across the curriculum, writing for professional audiences, and teaching writing to adolescents” (p. 43). All writing was graded using a rubric, and students were encouraged to revise and resubmit their work until it was satisfactory. To receive an “A” for the course, the work had to be publishable. In the five years that the courses were offered, more than half of

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