

Chapter 1

High-Impact Writing Support for Online Students Writing a Dissertation in Practice

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the unique writing needs of professional doctoral students and the writing goals of the dissertation in practice that distinguish these students from traditional research-oriented graduate student writers. In this chapter, the authors survey emerging scholarship that establishes best practices for online writing support. Additionally, this chapter combines the insights gained from the discussion of professional doctoral students' unique needs and writing support research in order to establish applicable best practices to support online professional doctoral students in the dissertation in practice writing process. These best practices are further informed by the authors' practical experience of launching an online professional doctoral degree writing center that currently serves more than 300 online students. This chapter concludes that intentional, tailored writing support complements professional graduate degree students' course work through a structured approach to the writing process that emphasizes transferable skills and reflective value.

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INTRODUCTION

Beginning in the 1990s, scholarship on writing instruction in general, and writing centers in particular, began recognizing the need for specialized support for graduate student writers. Unlike undergraduate students, graduate student writers reflect higher degrees of motivation, investment, experience, and technical specialization. More significantly, graduate students often came to writing centers for support with lengthy dissertations that used technical disciplinary language, and this student type defied the traditional undergraduate non-directive tutoring model (Farrell, 1994; Torrance et al., 1992; Torrance & Thomas, 1994; Vorhies, 2015). These differences led many writing center instructors to adopt varying approaches to support graduate student writers (see discussion in Lawrence & Zawacki, 2018; Summers, 2016).

Over the 1990s and 2000s, two substantive changes took place in graduate education, namely the increase in professional doctoral programs and the launch of online graduate programs. On the one hand, the proliferation of professional doctoral programs introduced the scholarly-practitioner as a new genre of graduate student writers (Bourner et al., 2001; Council of Graduate Schools, 2007; Trigwell, Shannon, & Maurizi, 1997; Neumann, 2005). A robust conversation ensued concerning the intended differences between traditional research-oriented graduate programs and these emerging professional doctoral programs (Blessinger & Stockley, 2016; Green et al., 2001; Hayter, 2008; Neumann, 2005). On the other hand, some of these professional doctoral programs followed broader trends in higher education and began launching online programs. In a 2007 report on professional doctoral programs, the Council of Graduate Schools concludes that “Professional doctoral programs are particularly adaptable to full or partial online delivery” (p.30).

Recent scholarship examines best practices to support graduate student writers and online student writers generally, but how to support online professional doctoral students specifically remains an under-researched area. Concerning the lack of research in this area, Heidi Nobles (2019) concludes, “I found very little scholarship, however, on writing center work with students who are professionals.” The chapter, therefore, argues that online professional doctoral students form a unique genre of graduate student writers who require specialized writing support that reflects the unique goals of the dissertation in practice. The following chapter unfolds in three parts. First, this chapter examines the unique writing needs of professional doctoral students and the writing goals of the dissertation in practice that distinguish these students from traditional research-oriented graduate student writers. Second, this chapter surveys emerging scholarship that establishes best practices for online writing support. Third, this chapter combines the insights from the two previous discussions in order to establish applicable best practices to support online professional doctoral students in the dissertation in practice writing process. These best practices are further

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