

Maximum Engagement, Minimum Distraction, and Knowledge Transference

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In the Indian academia, at the undergraduate and graduate levels, the focus on teaching “writing” is relatively new; traditional focus has been on teaching the English language or Communication Skills. The novelty of academic writing has called for rigorous efforts in its operation in the Indian context. In addition, the virtual learning environment required by the pandemic posed the serious challenge of adopting the academic writing pedagogy to the new format of the virtual classroom. This article showcases successful strategies adopted for graduate and undergraduate foundation writing courses at the Indian Institute of Technology Gandhinagar, which ensured maximum engagement and minimum distraction, and knowledge transference. The graduate and undergraduate courses differed in their goals of writing, including expected learning outcomes and practicality, as well as in terms of the disciplinary backgrounds of the students. The graduate course was concerned with the applicability and transferability of the knowledge and skills acquired in the course to varied discipline-specific and professional writings of the advanced students; the undergraduate course was conducted on the basis of general writing with intensive discussion components. In this article, we first focus on the pedagogical practices adopted in the graduate course to ensure knowledge and skill transfer to discipline-specific scholarly writing and professional writing as a whole. Thereafter, we discuss the undergraduate writing curriculum aimed at laying the foundation for practical academic communication and development of critical thinking.

In the Indian academia, at the undergraduate and graduate levels, the focus on teaching “writing” is relatively new; the usual traditional focus has been on teaching the English language or communication skills. The novelty of academic writing has called for rigorous efforts in its operation in the Indian context. In addition, the virtual learning environment required by the pandemic posed the serious challenge of adopting the academic writing pedagogy to the new format of the virtual classroom. This article showcases successful strategies adopted for undergraduate and graduate foundation writing courses at the Indian Institute of Technology Gandhinagar (IITGN), which ensured maximum engagement and minimum distraction, and knowledge transference. The graduate-level writing course was first introduced into the curriculum in Fall 2018, and the sequence of two undergraduate-level writing courses was initiated in Fall 2020. Our observations are based on teaching these courses from 2020 to 2021.

The graduate and undergraduate writing courses at IITGN differed in their goals of writing, including expected learning outcomes and practicality, as well as in terms of the disciplinary backgrounds of the students. The graduate course was concerned with the applicability and transferability of the knowledge and skills acquired in the course to varied discipline-specific and professional writings of the advanced students, whereas the undergraduate courses were conducted on the basis of general academic writing with intensive discussion components. Also, in terms of the learners’ disciplinary backgrounds, all undergraduate students are in an Engineering degree program (i.e., B.Tech), whereas graduate students vary from Engineering to

Natural Sciences and further to Humanities and Social Sciences.

In this article, we first focus on the pedagogical practices adopted in the graduate course to ensure knowledge and skill transfer to discipline-specific scholarly writing and professional writing, as a whole. Thereafter, we discuss the undergraduate writing curriculum aimed at laying the foundation for practical academic communication and critical thinking development.

Conceptual Framework

Design and delivery of our writing courses at IITGN were grounded upon perspectives in two areas—teaching English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and knowledge transference.

In addition to analytical and critical thinking, academic literacy involves a set of highly specialized linguistic conventions for written academic communication that are even distinct from those for spoken academic communication (Biber, 2006; Zhao, 2017). Therefore, building academic literacy skills is a challenging task to both native and nonnative English speakers, and this applies to the case of IITGN, whose students show a wide spectrum of language backgrounds and familiarity with the English language. English is few students’ first language, but most students have decent proficiency. For example, for the last 4 academic years from 2018 to 2021, 20.4% of the incoming undergraduate students were diagnosed to be in need of English language assistance, whereas the rest, 79.6%, actively performed in the classroom in which English is the language of instruction, with an optional

extracurricular 1-on-1 tutoring service. The institute's writing courses share the goal of learners' success in professional communication, mainly in terms of academic literacy. Under that, the approaches in the courses are close to those of teaching English for Academic Purposes (EAP), which is "tailored to the needs of learners at various, usually higher, educational levels" (Belcher, 2009, p. 2). The learning outcomes of our courses were defined in regard to learning a domain of written academic communication styles instead of vocabulary building, listening practice, or pronunciation, and thus, course materials were selected and organized to guide learners' reading and writing exercise to gain meaningful learning on the materials instead of guiding them to practice reading and writing skills per se (see also McCormack & Slaght, 2014).

The graduate course laid emphasis on knowledge transference from the course to discipline-specific scholarly writing and professional writing as a whole. The advanced students, who were already specialists in a domain, had sufficient exposure to English as the medium of instruction during their undergraduate degrees. This is because English is the language of instruction in Engineering education at the undergraduate level in India. It is also primarily used as the medium of instruction, across the country, for undergraduate studies in natural sciences, humanities, and social sciences. Thus a focal point for us was knowledge transference, a concern that writing courses across universities in the United States and United Kingdom continue to address. This concern is indicated by studies from writing pedagogists Michael Carter (North Carolina State University), Ken Hyland (University of London), Joanne Wolfe (Carnegie Mellon University), Katherine K. Gottschalk (Cornell University), Hogan Hayes, Dana R. Ferris, and Carl Whithaus (University of California, Davis). According to Hayes et al. (2016), students "had very little experience with the practical application of the abstract writing concepts taught in the ... writing course" (p. 209). We endeavored to bridge this gap and optimize the applicability of the knowledge and skills acquired by the students in our course to their specific domain and professional writing.

Graduate-Level Course: FP 602

The structure of the course is as follows: 1 hour of lecture attended by all students and 4 tutorial hours, per week. The students are divided evenly in the tutorial sections. The faculty member conducting the lectures (henceforth referred to as the primary instructor) is the overall in-charge of the course; additional faculty members from different departments of the institute and the primary instructor are in charge of a tutorial section each. The primary instructor is responsible for

determining the course content, working out the schedule, designing the assignments and the grading rubric, coordinating with the faculty in charge of the tutorial sections, and calibrating and submitting the grades for the course.

The graduate writing course is compulsory for graduate students—both master's and PhD—across all disciplines. Heterogeneity of the student body comprising mature and pragmatic students, who are already specialists in a domain, is thus the most significant challenge that the course poses. A class in a semester typically comprises 110–120 students; it includes students of varying levels, ranging from first-year master's to advanced PhD, from the different branches of Engineering, disciplines of Science, and specializations of Humanities and Social Sciences. A tutorial section has approximately 30 students; student allocation in the tutorial sections is not based on discipline specialization, and thus heterogeneity of the student group remains a key factor in the tutorials as well.

Primary Objectives

In a bid to make the learning process effective given the heterogeneous composition of the class, our primary objectives were: (a) finding unity in diversity, and (b) facilitating transference of knowledge and skills acquired in the course to domain-specific writing as well as professional writing in general.

Finding unity in diversity: This was achieved through focus on aspects of effective writing and genre that students need to be aware of across discipline specializations, and in terms of professional writing on the whole. The course focused on writing as a process, the significance of audience and purpose in terms of writing, tone and style, strategies for effective reading, qualities of effective writing (including punctuation), the research process and academic writing, academic integrity and plagiarism, and resources for help with writing. The genres included formal and informal emails, academic and popular writing on research findings, literature review papers, and abstracts. The modus operandi of the tutorials was based on the concept of writing being a three-step process including 1. prewriting (i.e. brainstorming and outlining), 2. drafting, and 3. revision.

Facilitating transference of knowledge and skills acquired in the course to domain-specific writing as well as professional writing in general: The problem of knowledge transference from writing courses to discipline-specific writing has been a key issue in studies on writing pedagogy in the US and UK academia. Our reference to the US and UK academia is due to the fact that these countries' academia take the global lead in research on writing pedagogy. The scholars referred to

here are focusing on undergraduate writing courses; however, the concerns they are raising and the lacuna they are pointing out are relevant to our graduate course and were taken into consideration in the conceptualization and the execution of the course.

Writing pedagogists Michael Carter, Ken Hyland, Joanne Wolfe, Katherine K. Gottschalk, Hogan Hayes, Dana R. Ferris, and Carl Whithaus, among others, have pointed out that students fail to transfer the knowledge gained in the writing courses to their discipline-specific writing. The reason for this, the previously mentioned writing pedagogists claim, is the lack of connection between writing courses and domain-specific writing. According to them, this gap results from the perception that disciplines are meant for domain-specific knowledge, while writing courses provide generalized knowledge, and hence are not relevant to discipline-specific writing. Additionally, as Carter (2007) argues, faculty in specific disciplines believe that writing in their specific disciplines is learnt by slow acculturation and not direct instruction (p. 386). Furthermore, Wolfe et al. (2014) point out, writing instructors, who are usually trained in the English departments, tend to view their own discipline's values, assumptions, and conventions as the norms in other disciplines (p. 43). Wolfe (2009) states that technical writing textbooks typically written by English faculty often give humanities-focused advice, such as uncritically promoting the active voice, or telling students that all documentation styles are similar to either Modern Library Association (MLA) or American Psychological Association (APA) (p. 362).

To bridge this gap, as Carter, Gottschalk, and Wolfe et al., have suggested, it is imperative that faculty across disciplines realize that writing is essential for effective communication of their domain-specific knowledge. Hence it is, as Carter (2007) claims, "within" and "not outside" their disciples (p. 408). Also as Gottschalk (1997) argues, "a writing program must work for, with, and in the interest of the disciplines ... It cannot be isolated administratively or in any other way if it is to operate successfully, if it is best to assist students and faculty" (p. 23). Second, although writing instructors do not need to know the conventions of each discipline, yet they must develop what Wolfe et al. (2014) term as a "Meta Awareness" of the differences, and make sure that the students are conscious of this (p. 21).

Our graduate writing course addressed these needs by adopting the following practices:

(a) The members of the faculty team comprising the primary instructor and the tutorial group instructors belonged to different disciplines: Humanities and Social Sciences, Sciences, and Engineering, which emphasized that teaching and learning of writing are integral to success in each discipline.

(b) Assignments integrated concepts of effective writing with the conventions and norms of discipline-

specific writing. "Meta awareness" of the differences in the written discourse of the varied disciplines was evident in that the students were made aware of variations existing in terms of discipline-specific writing norms; they were urged to take cognizance of that in their writing. For example while discussing the use of active and passive voice, attention was drawn to the fact that while in Humanities subjects the use of the active voice is prominent, in Sciences and Engineering the protocol is to use the passive voice. Again in the discussion of citations, varied citation styles were shown and it was emphasized that citation styles differ but in all citation styles, sources have to be cited both within the text (in an abbreviated form), and at the end fully in a reference/works cited page, however in different formats. The citation style a student would need to adhere to is determined by the norms of his/her discipline and the journal he/she is publishing in. It was suggested that the students follow the guidelines of the journal or the particular style manual as their resource for appropriate citation. "Meta awareness" of the differences in written conventions according to disciplines was further made explicit through guest lectures. For each of the genres that was focused on—academic and popular writing on the same research findings, literature review paper, and abstract—guest lecturers from the three broad discipline categories (Engineering, Science, and Humanities and Social Sciences) were invited to speak to the students grouped along these three broad discipline categories, about the specific norms of that genre in accordance to their particular discipline.

(c) Focus on Active Learning: The course adopted active learning pedagogy, which facilitates learning by doing. Aspects of writing—tone, style, features of effective writing, importance of audience and purpose, descriptive versus analytical writing—were taught not through definitions or detailed examples of existing writing, but by briefly explaining them and making students practice them through different kinds of writing relevant to their disciplines and professional careers. Prof. Umashankar Singh from Biological Sciences, IITGN, has taught tutorial sections, both online and offline, for several semesters with different faculty teams led by different primary instructors at IITGN. He pointed out that when instructors display fancy writing styles, the students who do not have much felicity with the English language feel demotivated thinking they can never attain such levels. Conversely, students conversant with English writing think there is nothing to learn, and do not invest in the writing course as much as they should and can. What gets lost, he remarked, is the importance of learning the larger process of writing: ideation, clarity of thoughts, configuring a draft by arranging the contents in a logical order, expanding or trimming, reading, rewriting, and remaining focused on the objective. Focus

on learning by doing was thus imperative for a meaningful learning experience in the course.

The approach taken was not concept based, but need based in terms of discipline-specific written discourse and professional writing. For example, the students were not taught descriptive, reflective, or analytical writing per se or made to practice such writings through exercises relevant exclusively to the writing course. Rather, through exercises relevant to their domain specializations and professional writing in general, they learned the different kinds of writing. This has been illustrated through the previously mentioned assignments in Table 1 as well as an email writing assignment illustrated in Table 2.

The students, therefore, learned the concepts of effective writing and the different genres of writing by “writing themselves.” They developed an awareness that writing necessitates thinking, which matures with time and practice, and as a process writing often involves re-writing. The assignment prompts recurrently referred to class instructions on effective writing:

In-Class Intervention

There was no typical sense of “in-class writing” in the tutorials for the graduate course. In offline teaching we would have an entire tutorial section together; it was possible to effectively engage students working at varied paces. In the online mode to ensure maximum engagement and minimum distraction, we divided the tutorial groups into subgroups. So during the brainstorming sessions, we had about eight to 10 students per group for an hour. They shared with the group what they wrote in that stipulated time. They worked on drafting the assignments out of their allocated tutorial times. When the drafts were peer-reviewed, we divided the groups even further. There would be five to six students in a group for an hour. This method of conducting the tutorial sessions made it possible for each student to receive individual attention, and the students felt that their tutorial time was optimally utilized both in terms of exchanging peer feedback and getting feedback from the instructor. The importance of peer learning and constructive criticism was made evident to the students through the tutorial sessions.

The successful execution of this course certainly relied on impeccable coordination among the faculty members engaged in the course. Regular discussions among the faculty, the tutorial instructors drawing on the lecture classes, adherence to the grading rubric for each assignment, and calibration of grades for each assignment prevented discrepancy, and assured the students that they were all on the same page despite being allocated to different tutorial groups.

Undergraduate Level Courses: HS191 and HS192

The undergraduate level writing curriculum was designed for incoming students in Engineering, as in IITGN, like most Indian Institutes of Technology, the undergraduate program (B. Tech.) is exclusively for the branches of Engineering. The undergraduate level writing curriculum consists of a series of two courses, *HS191: Introduction to Writing I* and *HS192: Introduction to Writing II*, which cover the first two semesters of the undergraduate program. The descriptions of the courses are based on practice and observation in 2020 and 2021.

A comprehensive understanding of the objectives and the pedagogical practices of the undergraduate writing courses necessitates delving into the role of English writing in Indian higher education, as well as comprehending the impact of the virtual classroom setting on the Indian education system.

Designing Written Academic Discourse for Freshmen in Engineering

Writing practice in academia needs to encompass the area of critical thinking and professional communication in that it provides a chance to hone skills of organizing thoughts, reflection, exposition, and persuasion. Our two writing courses, HS191 and HS192, were designed to help students make a systematic approach to written materials in basic genres such as descriptive, expository, and persuasive writing. In addition, we aligned the lessons with hands-on writing assignments to promote students’ understanding and exercise of multi-staged writing activities including brainstorming, drafting, and revision.

English has been a dominant working language for teaching and research in Indian higher education, and it was only recently that multilingual approaches to learning and empowering “home languages” were suggested by the Ministry of Human Resources Development (2020). When it comes to academic writing and communication in academia, students in college often face various challenges depending on their learning environments in primary and secondary education. Here we will discuss two major points: familiarity with using English in the academic setting and limited writing education in K–12.

First, one of the most common difficulties for students is a drastic shift of the “medium of instruction.” According to the latest national survey in 2016, almost 67% of Indian high schools use an Indian native language as a medium of instruction, or a language used in teaching (NCERT 2016). The percentage increases in primary and middle schools as illustrated in Table 4. English textbooks used in public schools have been criticized to be abstruse and outdated. Mohan (2014)

Table 1*Examples of Writing Assignments in FP 602*

Concept Writing:

1. Write about a concept you are interested in, from your field to a specialist audience from your field/department. (225–250 words)
2. Write about this concept to a general audience who knows nothing about it. For example, someone like me (an English professor), who is possibly reading about it in a newspaper. (225–250 words)

Exercise in Comprehension, Summarizing, and Analyzing: Steps of understanding existing research

1. Select an important paper/study in your field of specialization (You can use something that you are reading for one of your courses/request your adviser for suggestions/choose on your own).
2. Summarize the study (225–250 words).
3. Analyze the significance of this study (225–250 words).

Abstract Writing:

1. Write an abstract of 300–350 words for an interdisciplinary conference, which includes your field of expertise, based on research that you are doing or have done.
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Table 2*Sample Instruction of Email Writing Assignment in FP 602*

Assignment 1: Writing an Email

1. Write an email to the Director of IIT Gandhinagar sharing your thoughts about the Writing Course, which is a compulsory course for all graduate students of the institute. This is a formal email and you are expected to adhere to the conventions of a formal email, as discussed in class.
 2. Write an email to your best friend sharing your thoughts about the Writing Course, which is a compulsory course for all graduate students of the institute (informal).
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Table 3*Writing Tips*

Writing Tips mentioned in the prompts:

1. Keep in mind the qualities of effective writing that we discussed in class.
 2. Revise, edit and proofread what you have written (check for grammar and erroneous use of words; do not write too long convoluted sentences that are structurally difficult to follow; make sure what you are writing makes sense); you will not do well if you do a hurried last-minute job. Remember—writing is a process and writing is rewriting!
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Table 4
Percentage of Schools Where Medium of Instruction is Non-English (NCERT 2007; NCERT 2016)

	Primary	Upper Primary	Secondary	Higher Secondary
Survey year 1993	95.01%	84.09%	81.63%	71.91%
Survey year 2002	87.02%	81.75%	74.16%	66.41%
Survey year 2009	84.51%	78.92%	71.27%	66.94%

points out that English textbooks in some local language medium schools reflect “the old-fashioned British usage.”

The abstruseness of the prose in English comprehension passages, with obscure allusions, and the needless complexity of the explanations in science texts ensure that teachers and children will end up memorising set answers and glossing over chunks of mysterious stuff, instead of engaging with the language. (p. 22)

Under this backdrop, it is estimated that at least 69% of incoming students to college per year may lack basic English academic communication skills such as note-taking, reading textbooks, and other essential skills for successful learning.

Secondly, writing practice in Indian K–12 schools has been guided in a prescriptive and authoritarian manner (Rai, 2015). According to Rai’s overview of usual Indian classrooms, writing activities put emphasis on the “mechanics of writing,” which could lead students to “memorize” the structure and content of essays instead of following through with their thought process. Therefore, the learning outcome seems to be far from practical considerations such as expressing clear thoughts and strategizing simple and effective ways of communication.

Considering the backgrounds of the K–12 education, in addition to the significantly escalated complexity and genre-specific conventions in academic literacy of higher education (or English for Academic Purposes) as discussed in the previous section Conceptual framework, we believe that writing pedagogy at the undergraduate level in Indian academia should first target laying the groundwork for practical academic communication and critical thinking development. The new targets will be possible by engaging students actively in the writing process of brainstorming, drafting, and revising; the key to success will be how effectively we motivate students and facilitate the near-to-real

writing process in the classroom. Therefore, these objectives guided the designing and the execution of the two-semester undergraduate writing courses.

Virtual Classroom Setting in India, 2020

In 2020, India practiced a highly restrictive 68-day-long lockdown from March 25 to May 31, during which all schools and businesses were closed excluding those for daily necessities. Colleges were back in operation virtually in June 2020, and most of them continued the online mode for the next 18 months. The total duration of school closures in India was 82 weeks (UNESCO, 2022). This abrupt change in the classroom setting led to an overall transition from physical to virtual classrooms.

In India, most students in universities were open to the online setting, as pointed out by Muthuprasad et al. (2021). According to the survey in Muthuprasad et al. with Indian university students, the number of students who had a positive attitude to having virtual classes under the pandemic (67.1%) was twice as many as the number of students who favored academic suspension instead (29.97%). Thus, the pandemic opened the door to virtual classrooms with relatively little resistance from learners.

It must be also noted that in 2020, most Indian students in the virtual classroom used a smartphone with cellular data (Muthuprasad et al., 2021). Especially for the incoming undergraduate students, it was a major issue to equip them with a device for online class participation. Our institute took action, preemptively, for the students in need of technical devices. In academic years 2020-21 and 2021-22, the institute collected surveys from students and opened a special drive for funding the purchase of computers, in addition to its already existing student loan facility for technical purchase. A total of 103 recipients was funded for purchasing a device, mostly a laptop computer, for virtual classroom participation.

Yet, there remained the problem of digital distraction with conducting classes, labs, and tutorials online. During the days in physical classrooms, digital distraction, especially with cell phones, had been a major

negative influence on students' learning (Flanigan & Babchuk, 2020). In the virtual classroom, students were inevitably exposed to more distractions, which called for effective but non-coercive strategies to attract students' attention and keep track of their writing activities.

Primary Objectives

To attain our goals of laying the foundation for practical academic communication and development of critical thinking, taking into consideration the challenges posed by the digital mode of instruction, the undergraduate writing courses adopted the following pedagogical practices:

Given that the incoming students were still at home during the pandemic, priority was given to designing activities for constructing teacher-pupil and pupil-pupil relationships. Under the assumption that Krashen's Affective Filter theory is applicable to academic writing classrooms, instructors focused on lowering students' anxiety and empowering them by first making them discuss and write about topics that were close to students' own life.

Various ice-breaking activities were conducted at the beginning of lessons in the first week. For example, through a verbal sentence completion task (e.g., '*I feel very happy when _____.*'), one by one students shared their personal perspectives with their classmates and their instructor.

In terms of writing projects, the first few could be written without external sources and materials as exemplified in Table 5. The first two writing assignments called for students' memories and entailed writing about their passion, skill sets, and familiar item/person/event.

As shown in the second project of Table 5, the first course HS191 in the first semester focused on habitualizing the writing process (selecting topic-brainstorming-drafting-revising), and the basic structure of an essay. For this reason, copyediting skills and grammatical concerns were introduced in the second half of HS191. This helped engage students that had low confidence in English usage.

The development of course units was roughly the following: HS191 covered self-introduction, descriptive/reflective writing, and email writing with audience assessment. HS192 covered analytical reading and writing in general and scientific topics, persuasive writing, and expository writing with data. The assignment illustrated in Table 6 was the last project in HS192.

The project in Table 6 aimed at developing students' expository writing skills. Students needed to use for this project both their existing knowledge about the target item, as well as new knowledge, history, or noticeable information about it drawn from external sources. This

writing practice was fostered by lessons regarding source search and evaluation, and data presentation and synchronization.

In addition, inviting active scholars in relevant fields and making students listen to their understanding and examples of writing was aimed at motivating students, most of whom would like to succeed in academia as well as industry. Each education module had one speaker as described in Table 7.

To summarize, the undergraduate-level writing courses HS191 and HS 192 were designed to help students think and express their ideas and thoughts in effective ways in academic and other professional situations. The main objective, along with confidence building, was achieved through writing exercises and motivating exercises such as telling their familiar stories and communicating with professors closely in the invited talks.

“Collective Writing” as a Course Activity

Key to the success of our undergraduate writing course was the “collective writing process” using word-processing platform, Google Docs. Students were invited to a shared Google document, which was stored in the instructor's Google account or their Google Classroom. During the virtual meetings, students were asked to find the shared document and begin drafting their essays. This activity was highly useful in the stage of topic selection as well as brainstorming for an initial draft.

The instructor could keep track of students' cursor movement, which indicated the real-time activities of participating students. While scrolling up and down, the instructor could provide live feedback and have meaningful conversations with the students about the written content.

From the classmates' point of view, these interactions were meaningful as they could learn from the peer-instructor conversations. At times, students could participate in ongoing conversations for a follow-up question or further clarification. These collective writing activities facilitated constant and immediate feedback in all of the writing activities of the undergraduate courses. The rightmost column of Table 8 contains lessons using collective writing notes.

In addition to collective writing, two more strategies were exercised for student-centered learning. To promote students' motivation and consequential engagement, HS191 and HS192 aligned motivational talks by active scholars in the field once per learning unit. Providing close-to-real-life materials aimed to increase students' practicality and retention. Also, students were given ownership of choosing and developing the topic, which enabled them to actively participate in the learning process. Second, students were

Table 5*Topics of Two Writing Assignments in HS191**Writing Project 1: Excellence Awards of Anything and Everything:*

1. Find one of your passions (what you are doing well or what you enjoy doing) and illustrate it!
2. Rubrics include clarity, reasoning (quantitative and qualitative), cohesion, length, and format.

Writing Project 2: Descriptive Writing: Choose one item, person, or event you are familiar with and describe it.

1. Project consists of two submissions, first draft and revised draft.
2. Both submissions are graded based on format, cohesion, length, clarity, and the use of sensory perceptions.
3. The second submission has one more component, copyediting, in rubrics.

Table 6*Instruction and Rubrics of the Item Report Writing Assignment in HS192**Instruction of Item Report (Expository writing with tables and figures)*

Choose one product that is in your home and very familiar to you. It could be a tool you use every day or a snack you enjoy. Make a background search on the product and/or the manufacturer and observe the object by yourself. Your job is to write a report including an overview (background, history, company, or something informative or interesting) and a description of it. While doing it, insert at least one illustration/photo and at least one table/graph relevant to your report in a given format. Your inserted information (illustration, photo, table, or graph) will be mentioned in the written report to strengthen a point you'd like to make. Also, it will be properly labeled with numbers, captions, and due credit. Please consult the rubrics for more detailed guidelines.

Simplified Rubrics

1. Clarity: Topic and thesis statement are well presented.
2. Structure: Introduction consists of a background/overview and the thesis statement; main body contains at least one image and one table or chart.
3. Format: Inserted images/tables/charts are presented in the following format: (i) labeled with a number (e.g., Figure 1, Table 1), (ii) captioned (e.g., Parle G packet), (iii) source/credit is given (if it was found on a webpage, provide a URL).
4. Relevance: Inserted images/tables/charts are relevant to the written content and they are mentioned in the text content.
5. Length: Between 240–300 words excluding captions and titles.
6. Page setup, author information, and copyediting requirements: (i) Google Docs with Times New Roman 11pt and 1-inch margins, (ii) student name, student ID, section, and date of submission, (iii) spelling, grammar, and punctuation in terms of tense, subject-verb agreement, use of be-verb, connecting clauses, complete sentence, capitalization, and part of speech

Table 7
Invited Talks in HS192

Focus of Units and Invited Speeches

1. Academic writing (Prof. Umashankar Singh, Biological Engineering at IITGN)
2. Research writing (Prof. Uttama Lahiri, Electrical Engineering at IITGN)
3. Persuasive writing (Prof. Sharmita Lahiri, Humanities and Social Sciences at IITGN)
4. Importance of writing after graduation (Prof. Manish Kumar, Civil Engineering at IITGN)

Table 8
Example of a Module Structure

Prompt: Describe one person, item, or event in your life using five senses and motion verbs

Module #	Class (1 hr)	Tutorials (1.5 hr)	Tutorials (1.5 hr)
Week #1	Lecture (Descriptive writing; 5 senses)	Discussions (Features of descriptions: 5 senses and motion verbs) and Writing (Using collective writing note)	Writing (Using collective writing note)
Week #2	Lecture (Paragraph structure; punctuation)	Discussions (Common mistakes) and Revising (Using collective writing note)	Revising (Using collective writing note)

provided with clear learning objectives and rubrics at the beginning of a unit so they could understand their performance in relation to the unit's goals and expectations. Thus, students played two simultaneous roles as active performers and active evaluators of their learning progress.

To summarize, the undergraduate writing courses HS191 and HS192 were designed and practiced to foster incoming B.Tech. students' general academic writing and critical thinking skill development, in the virtual mode, using intervention strategies, which highlighted the writing procedure and its relevance to academic success.

Limitations

The limitations of the graduate as well as the undergraduate courses stemmed primarily from the online mode of instruction. While the negative impact of digital distractions was somewhat evident in the undergraduate writing courses, such distractions did not affect the graduate students to any considerable extent in

FP602. The possible explanation is, as mature learners, the graduate students realized the importance of investing in a course that would be beneficial for their academic and professional advancement. Additionally, many of the graduate students either remained or returned to the residential campus and took online classes from the campus itself; being in the academic setting with their peers facilitated their academic engagement in the virtual mode. However, in the graduate course, during the large lecture class, due to bandwidth issues, the students needed to keep their cameras and microphones switched off. Hence, it was difficult for the primary instructor to comprehend student response to in-class teaching and student-instructor interaction during the lectures was limited. This lack of an ambience of interaction, created by the virtual mode, led to some students refraining from seeking clarifications or asking questions in the lecture class.

In the case of undergraduate courses, limited engagement hours played as one of the obstacles. In the academic years 2020–2021 and 2021–2022, national

university entrance examinations were postponed and incoming students' first semester began in November instead of late July. Due to the significant delay, the first semester was operated for 5 to 6 weeks, and the total hours of engagement were reduced to 27–39 hours. Therefore, HS191 covered a relatively smaller number of units and materials than the initial design, and HS192 carried over some of the units in exchange of canceling some advanced units at the end. Another temporary obstacle was the fact that successful online interaction required a satisfactory level of technical facility for all participants.

Despite the institute providing support for procuring laptops, several students faced the challenge of inadequate internet bandwidth. Added to this, digital distraction did compromise to an extent the learning of some of our new college entrants.

Future Implications

Although this article discusses practices that were adopted for online instruction, we believe these can be successfully translated into the physical classroom. The graduate course can continue, along with its other components, conducting the tutorials by breaking them into subgroups and refraining from the traditional mode of “in-class writing” in the tutorials. The undergraduate courses in the classroom can facilitate collective writing, which promotes individual writing practice as well as collective learning. In the second half of the Spring semester of 2022, when all of the courses were completely back to the physical classroom at the institute, HS192 conducted in-person writing sessions with students using a laptop or a tablet computer. Instructors moved around the students holding a device connected to the collective notepad. In so doing, students comfortably built familiarity with the writing process with instructor's guidance.

Conclusion

Introducing compulsory writing courses at both the undergraduate and the graduate level, across all disciplines, in a predominantly Engineering school, in the Indian context where there is hardly any instruction on writing, either at the undergraduate or the graduate level, is a novel initiative. The key to the success of the graduate writing course was designing it in a format that ensured maximization of the applicability and transferability of the knowledge and skills acquired in the course to varied discipline-specific and professional writings of the advanced students, who were already specialists in a domain. The undergraduate courses succeeded in achieving their objectives of basic writing and thinking skill development, due to the high level of engagement of the students in the learning process. This was made possible by lowering the affective filter with

motivational talks and engaging students in hands-on practices.

The objective behind this novel endeavor, as explained by Prof. Sudhir Jain, former Director of the IIT Gandhinagar, who took the onus of introducing the courses, was (i) to create awareness about the significance of writing on academic and professional success and (ii) to locate the teaching and practice of writing in an overall institutional perspective. Both of which, as he remarked, are essential for facilitating student success and setting a benchmark in the global academic context.

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