

# The Graduate Writing Institute: Overcoming Risk, Embracing Strategies, and Appreciating Skills

---

---

Melissa Thomas  
College of Charleston  
Amanda Williams  
Jinny Case  
University of Texas at San Antonio

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the results from the Graduate Writing Institute, a week-long graduate writing workshop at a research-intensive HSI university in the southwest. Sixty-three graduate students who worked on large writing projects, such as theses or dissertations, volunteered to attend one of four separate Writing Institutes. These students took a pre- and post- Writing Inventory of Skills and Preferences (WISP) with significant increases in the WISP scores from pre-test to post-test, which indicated that the non-contextualized, cross-disciplinary content and structure of the Writing Institute successfully increased students' knowledge of academic writing skills, including higher order concerns and lower order concerns. Additionally, evaluation survey results confirmed that attending the Graduate Writing Institute helped students overcome feelings of "academic risk." Providing graduate students working on their thesis/dissertation with this type of specialized learning assistance (non-course based, interdisciplinary, non-contextualized holistic approach to addressing lower order concerns, higher order concerns, and academic risk) in a week long intensive institute with instructional time, peer interaction, individual writing time, and one-on-one writing consultations should be replicated for the benefit of graduate students at other institutions.

*Key words:* Graduate students, academic writing, academic risk, non-contextualized, writing assistance

In academia, an outdated assumption exists that graduate students possess sufficient academic writing skills that they acquired prior to entry into graduate school (Gaillet, 1996; Turner & Edwards, 2006) and, therefore, do not need writing assistance (Sullivan, 1991). Traditionally, this assumption goes hand-in-hand with a lack of graduate writing assistance. This absence of graduate-level support has at least three possible causes: a) faculty members' apprehension of anything remedial (Rose & McClafferty, 2001); b) the general acceptance that graduate writing is a "solitary activity" (Mullen, 2006, p. 30); and c) that "acts of writing are both marginalized and privatized in the graduate classroom" (Sullivan, 1991). However, Rose and McClafferty (2001) make the argument that each institution must have its own discussion and decision about whether these types of supports are needed. At the research intensive Hispanic-serving institution where this study was conducted, the graduate faculty overwhelmingly responded (95%) to an initial survey stating that graduate students do need writing assistance, and the Writing Institute was crafted to respond to that need.

Rose and McClafferty (2001) go on to explain that graduate students face various writing problems. Such problems include being new to their academic field at the professional level and therefore unfamiliar with the field's conventions, discussing both qualitative and quantitative data, being unsure of mechanics and punctuation conventions, or struggling with ESL issues (Rose & McClafferty, 2001; see also, Snively, Freeman, & Prentice, 2006). Additionally, many graduate student writers experience anxiety because writing has always been difficult for them (Rose & McClafferty, 2001). However, within this broad range of issues, some concerns can be addressed in a non-contextualized venue outside of their individual departments, while others cannot (Snively, Freeman, & Prentice, 2006). Therefore, scholars and practitioners continue to question what kind of writing assistance graduate students need and how these writers can best receive that assistance.

## Background

This project was originally externally funded as a two-year student services grant designed to assist graduate students through a variety of new services, including individual writing consultations, peer mentoring, and biannual Writing Institutes. The researchers, a writing faculty member and a learning assistance administrator, chose intensive four-day Writing Institutes (a combination of writing workshop and seminar) because other institutions had successfully used similar models, with dissertation boot camps being a popular example (Liechty, Liao, & Schull, 2009). Subsequently, the Council of Graduate Schools (2008) released a report recommending dissertation retreats or boot camps as a promising practice to promote doctoral student success. What distinguished our Writing Institute from these boot camps was a unique combination of instructional time each morning, working lunches in cross-disciplinary groups, intensive writing time each afternoon, peer editing at the end of the week, and individual writing consultations with a researcher/instructor or graduate writing consultant. This format drew from best practices in the vast amount of literature, offering students a variety of strategies and readers.

With limited time for actual instruction during the Writing Institutes (three hours a day for four days), pragmatism dictated each day's chosen content. Material needed to be not only useful, but also to fulfill the attendees' specific needs. Because the Writing Institutes were aimed specifically at those graduate students who had already begun working on large writing projects (such as a thesis, dissertation, or paper for publication), most of the applicants did not identify issues with formulating ideas or topics for assignments. Their focus, stated through their applications, was primarily on improving the writing they had already done, improving their writing skills in general, or improving their motivation and accountability to complete their project.

Two sources helped the researchers refine the content for the Institutes. First, an initial survey of graduate faculty asked, "Are there specific issues with graduate student writing that you feel need to be addressed (i.e., conciseness, organization, the writing process, etc.)?" Although this might have been a leading question, the researchers'

experience with graduate faculty was that they were not writing pedagogy experts; therefore, with no guidance, their answers would be too generic. Second, the graduate student applicants identified their biggest challenge regarding writing on their Writing Institute applications. Responses from both the faculty survey and the applications fell into the following categories: organization, clarity, formality, syntax, grammar, citation, and motivation. Therefore, three distinct classes of needs emerged that the researchers hoped to address at the Institutes: higher order concerns, lower order concerns, and writing anxiety (or what we refer to as “academic risk”). Faigley and Witte (1981) defined higher order concerns as those revisions that affect the meaning of the completed work and lower order concerns as those revisions or edits that do not necessarily affect meaning. But the distinctions are not so clear: as Rose and McClafferty (2001) discovered through their graduate writing course, the lines between these topics very often blur; for instance, an instructional moment about semicolons led us to a discussion on voice and formality.

### **Literature Review**

In order to better understand the needs that graduate students have in regards to their writing, we must understand (a) how actual problems in writing are identified as either higher order concerns or lower order concerns; (b) how motivation affects writing, as seen through academic risk; and (c) how graduate students are currently receiving writing assistance, in either contextualized or non-contextualized settings.

#### **Higher Order Concerns**

Bean (1996) developed a more concrete definition of higher order concerns and lower order concerns, listing specific categories of revisions and edits that are included in each. Bean (1996) defined HOCs as “concerns of ideas, organizations, development, and overall clarity” (p. 243). HOCs can also include problems with the purpose of a work and/or following the assignment; quality/clarity/originality of the thesis; the quality/logic of the argument; development and organization of ideas; transitions between ideas and paragraphs; the use of sufficient evidence and detail; paragraph organization; and

unity and coherence within the paragraphs themselves (Bean, 1996). Writers address these issues during various stages of revision.

These HOCs are not unique to graduate writers. Many writers, regardless of academic level, have problems with organization and transitions, for example. However, because graduate students write papers that typically address concepts, ideas, and arguments quite a bit larger in scope and scale than undergraduate writers, HOCs can become all the more daunting (Sullivan, 1991). While undergraduate papers tend to be conceptually singular, graduate papers tend to cover multiple key concepts and terms (Thomas, 2012). Therefore, many graduate students concern themselves with logical order issues, such as which key terms or concepts should be introduced first and how to determine which predicates the other (Pemberton, 2002).

### **Lower Order Concerns**

Bean (1996) identified LOCs as “grammatical errors, misspellings, punctuation mistakes, and awkwardness in style” (p. 246). LOCs also include excessive passive construction, chopiness, wordiness, redundancies, misuse/vague use of pronouns, misplaced modifiers, fragmented or run-on sentences, and issues of parallelism. Writers should address these LOCs during the editing stage (Rose, 1984).

Graduate students’ LOCs tend to vary tremendously. Many graduate writers may simply need a quick review of comma rules and conventions, while others struggle a great deal with concepts like pronoun usage, subject-verb agreement, the use of articles, and punctuation conventions when joining clauses (Rose & McClafferty, 2001). These lower order concerns do not necessarily differ from the lower order concerns that undergraduate writers face; however, graduate writers may be less likely than undergraduate writers to seek assistance in these areas of writing because of a perceived stigma (Gaillet, 1996). In addition, graduate students may be unfamiliar with grammar rules or punctuation conventions simply because of the length of time since they have received writing instruction (Snively, Freeman, & Prentice, 2006). Finally, they may feel they have received too little or even conflicting instruction on things like where to put a comma or how to use a semicolon and, therefore, have given up on learning the conventions at this stage in their academic career (Rose

& McClafferty, 2001).

### **Academic Risk**

Pamela Richards addressed risk in her chapter in Howard Becker's groundbreaking book on academic writing for graduate students (Richards, 1986). Scholars and practitioners know that graduate students express negative feelings in regards to writing. For example, they may feel that writing is scary, frustrating, and isolating, and they may feel vulnerable as a writer (see Aronson & Swanson, 1991; Gaillet, 1996; Hadjioannou, Shelton, Fu, & Dhanarattigannon, 2007; Mullen, 2006; Turner & Edwards, 2006; Zuber-Skerritt & Knight, 1986). Additionally, researchers discuss how the stakes can be higher for graduate students than undergraduate students because they perceive their writing as being tied to their academic identity (see Bloom, 1981; Nielsen & Rocco, 2002; Rose & McClafferty, 2001). Some graduate students question their ability as writers and as academics (Nielsen & Rocco, 2002). Researchers term these negative feelings writing anxiety (see Bloom, 1981; Hadjioannou et al., 2007; Nielsen & Rocco, 2002), but the term "academic risk" seems more descriptive because it encompasses a broad range of negative feelings and cognitions toward writing and effectively links graduate-level writing to academic success and academic identity.

The feeling that writing is risky places obstacles in the writer's way, such as "stuckness," procrastination, perfectionism, and isolationism (see Aronson & Swanson, 1991; Kiley, 2009; Mullen, 2006; Nielsen & Rocco, 2002; Zuber-Skerritt & Knight, 1986). These obstacles can lead to a lack of productivity and motivation, which is why graduate writers can make use of assistance in overcoming these obstacles. For instance, perfectionism can be addressed through peer discussions that debunk the common myth that there is "one right way" to write a paper (Becker, 1986, p. 43). Procrastination is commonly addressed through accountability and encouraging daily writing (Boice, 1990). Isolation can be addressed through both inter- and intra-disciplinary peer interaction and discussion about the challenges in writing at the graduate level (Sullivan, 1991).

In order to overcome writing apprehension, or stuckness, many experts recommend strategies such as fast writing, freewriting, and

writing in alternative forms such as haiku (McKinney, 2003). Rose (1984) believes that the roots of writing blocks come from cognitive messages that writers tell themselves, such as employing rigid writing rules, editing too early in the composition process, lacking appropriate planning, having a negative attitude towards writing, or evaluating writing with incorrect lenses. Hidi and Boscolo (2006) link this cognitive model of writing to notions of self-regulation and motivation. Thus, these skill-based approaches rely on the psychology behind writing to reduce academic risk and build the graduate writer's self-efficacy and confidence (Hidi & Boscolo, 2006).

### **Contextualized versus Non-Contextualized Writing Assistance**

Previous research on graduate writing assistance has primarily focused on addressing graduate writing issues contextually within the discipline (Rose & McClafferty, 2001). Graduate students typically gain most of their graduate-level writing experience through immersion into the field in what could be considered a type of mentor/mentee relationship between the student and his or her graduate faculty advisor (Liechty, Liao, & Schull, 2009). In this way, a student receives one-on-one attention from an advisor about one particular project at a time. Rietschleger (2001) described the entire process of developing and writing a dissertation as "an apprenticeship" (p. 582). This contextualized focus on one particular project certainly has its advantages, but also has limitations in its narrow focus. Despite individualized attention, this discipline-specific, contextualized writing assistance may not always provide a student with a set of generalized skills applicable to future projects when the advisor may not possess pedagogical writing knowledge (Blakeslee, 1997; Gaillet, 1996). Moreover, Snively, Freeman, and Prentice (2006) point out that some advisors might not even have a desire to be writing instructors. Additionally, the mentor/mentee relationship may hinder the student's freedom to explore his or her own academic voice and authority (Turner & Edwards, 2006; Blakeslee, 1997). Turner and Edwards (2006) go on to explain that issues of power must be discussed and dealt with in these writing mentorship relationships in order for individual voice and authority to be validated.

To remedy the various drawbacks of contextualized assistance

is an emerging trend of non-contextualized assistance at the institutional level that provides graduate students writing support (see Liechty et al., 2009; DiPerro, 2007). Liechty et al. (2009) categorized the factors and support affecting dissertation completion as individual characteristics, relational factors, or structural factors. Individual characteristics include a) psychological factors, such as fear, anxiety, procrastination, and locus of control and b) skills preparation, such as “the knowledge of how to plan, implement, and write up a large-scale independent project” (Liechty et al., 2009, p. 486), both of which can be influenced by institutional supports. Additionally, they demonstrated that assistance in relational arenas included support from peers and faculty, while structural factors viewed the institution as a partner in the student’s success (Liechty et al., 2009). Support at all levels has included, among others, mentorship, writing studios, dissertation camps/retreats, workshops, writing groups, courses, peer groups, and peer groups with a professor presence (see Aronson & Swanson, 1991; Galett, 1996; Hadjioannou, Shelton, & Dhanarattigannon, 2007; Kiley, 2009; Mullen, 2006; Rose & McClafferty, 2001; Turner & Edwards, 2006; Zuber-Skerritt & Knight, 1986).

This body of literature, pertaining to graduate student writing needs and best practices in providing graduate student learning assistance, points to a holistic approach of the graduate student writer outside of his or her discipline. This holistic approach must model “authentic discourse” (Mullen, 2006, p. 33) that reveals the seemingly mysterious steps to writing academic texts (Sullivan, 1991) while providing a community of support for overcoming writing risk, embracing writing strategies, and appreciating the skills necessary for academic writing success.

### **Research Aim**

In this study, the Writing Institute content and delivery method aimed to first, and foremost, address students’ needs. Only after analyzing the results of our two assessment tools, the Writing Inventory of Skills and Preferences (Symons, 2007) and an evaluation survey, did it become clear that the content and format of the Writing Institute addressed graduate students’ needs. Therefore, the project’s research goal was to assess through pre-test/post-test and



survey evaluation how well the Writing Institute addressed graduate students' HOCs, LOCs, and academic risk in a non-contextualized setting. It was only then that our research aim became clear: to share the content, format, and measures that work in addressing graduate student writing needs.

### **Methods and Procedures**

The Writing Institute was taught by two of the researchers four times during the grant period, twice over spring break (2008 and 2009) and twice during the maymester (2008 and 2009). These instructors facilitated writing workshops Monday through Thursday from 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m., which included instruction on overcoming writing blocks, initiating drafting methods, employing appropriate punctuation, creating appropriate organization, following logical order, citing sources, utilizing concrete language, and participating in peer editing. Additionally, the instructors or a graduate writing tutor provided individual one-on-one writing consultations to those participants who desired them in the manner that Snively (2008) describes as working best with graduate students: “collaborative talk, affective support, and decoding academic jargon to assure students they are on the right track” (p. 91).

### **Materials**

At the first Institute, the instructors provided the students with a pocket-sized writing manual. Additionally, subsequent cohorts received a self-published workbook, which included visuals and handouts for all the activities of the Institute. The Institute also provided lunch each day so that students could work in collegial, cross-disciplinary groups applying that day's content into their own projects. They were grouped into roundtables with those at similar stages in their respective programs, allowing them to formulate peer relationships.

### **Participants**

More than 80 graduate students submitted applications for the first four Writing Institutes. Seventy-three students were chosen to attend based on their application and writing project status. The instructors chose to keep the group sizes small (under 20 participants)

in order to facilitate deeper discussion and build group cohesion more quickly. Because several students were unable to attend the entire week due to emergencies, sickness, or travel, 63 students successfully completed the Institute measured by completion of the pre- and post- Writing Inventory of Skills and Preferences (WISP) and Writing Institute survey evaluation.

The Writing Institute focused on students working on large writing projects (theses, dissertations, or seminar/exit papers) because research suggests that these projects can be obstacles to graduation (Liechty et al., 2009). For example, Peters (1992) found that approximately one-fifth of doctoral students who attain candidacy do not finish their dissertation. Lovitts (2001) and the Council of Graduate Schools (2008) confirmed that approximately 50% of doctoral students do not complete their Ph.D.s and acknowledge that between 15-25% of students who advance to candidacy never graduate.

The grant which funded the Writing Institutes targeted students who have historically been underserved, and the institution is a large HSI (Hispanic Serving Institution) in the southwest with a growing graduate student population, seeing an increase of 20% from fall 2007 to fall 2011 (UTSA OIR, 2011). Brus (2006) notes that, over the past three decades, demographics of the graduate student population in the United States are moving toward a more diverse and less traditional population, including women, minority students, international students, students of nontraditional age, and students with dependents. Brus (2006) contends that this changing demographic should encourage service providers to view graduate students as not one homogenous population, and we argue that with this in mind, there is a growing need for more and varied assistance to these students.

The demographic breakdown of this university's graduate student population reflected this national trend; moreover, this trend was reflected in the breakdown of the Writing Institute participants (UTSA OIR, 2008). The majority of the initial participants were of minority students (52% were Black, Hispanic, or Asian Pacific Islander), and the majority were women (65.8%). Additionally, 47% of the Writing Institute participants were first generation college students, and 70% were first generation graduate students. In summary, the

Writing Institute met the needs of what Brus (2006) believes to be the new graduate student demographic.

## Content

The content presented during the week of the Institute varied slightly per offering, yet focused on covering all stages in the writing process (prewriting through editing) and on those self-identified writing weaknesses of the particular participants. The content of the Writing Institutes was conveyed through both discussion as well as activities that simultaneously addressed more than one area of need (see Appendix A). This blended approach made the Writing Institute similar to both a seminar and a hands-on workshop, the latter of which has proven to be a successful approach with graduate students (Mullen, 2006).

## Instruments

A pre- and post-Writing Inventory of Skills and Preferences (WISP) was administered to the 63 participants who completed the Writing Institute to see if they developed certain writing skills. Laura Symons (2007) created the WISP in order to develop metacognitive skills in students concerning their writing skills, preferences, and style. Symons (personal communication, January 4, 2013) reflects on the creation of the WISP and its theoretical foundation:

A few years ago, I was working with the Learning and Study Skills Inventory (LASSI) in conjunction with information from Rita Smilkstein on how the brain works in learning. The combination was extremely useful in helping students understand themselves as learners, a kind of self-reflection that often leads to metacognition. It occurred to me that an inventory on writing could have a similar value for student writers.

As a student of Donald Murray in the 1970s, I learned to look at writing as a process and used an understanding of the process to help students in the classroom, conference teaching, and tutoring, to develop fluency in writing. I started thinking about what kind of information about the engagement in the writing process would be useful for a student. The result, with help from Rita Smilkstein and others, was the Writing Invento-

ry of Skills and Preferences (WISP).

The WISP evaluates students' writing skills and preferences based on self-reported answers to questions concerning their knowledge about the skills necessary to write and their preferred approach to the task of writing. The results are divided into two sections: skills and preferences. The skills portion of the WISP measures students' awareness of the skills needed to write, such as prewriting, argument, organization, transition, conclusion, editing, and revising. Although knowledge of writing skills is important, researchers, teachers, and learning assistance specialists know that every writer has a preferred approach to writing. The philosophy behind the WISP is that the more flexible a writer can become in his or her approach to writing, the better chance the writer has of "receiving the full value of the process and practice of writing" (L. Symons, personal communication, May 4, 2011). Moreover, the participants in this study enjoyed taking the WISP as it gave them insight into their personal writing strategies and enabled them to see the impact that the Institute had on their writing.

Finally, researchers surveyed all participants at the end of the Writing Institute to measure their satisfaction with the program, asking them what they found to be most and least beneficial and whether attending the Institute helped them make positive progress either toward completion of their writing project or graduation. Researchers also asked students to rate on a five point satisfaction survey scale, if participating encouraged them to continue writing, if the book and resource materials were helpful, if the leaders were sensitive to the needs of the attendees, if the amount of structure provided was appropriate, and if the discussion of topics was useful to their current writing skill level.

## Results

The Writing Institute successfully addressed the needs of the participants as evidenced through three different mechanisms: WISP, satisfaction survey scaled response questions, and an open-ended question asking what the participants liked best about the Writing Institute. Participants' post-tests on the WISP showed statistically significant increases in scores across all writing skills elements

( $t(63)=7.874, p=.000$ ), while their responses to general satisfaction questions showed overall satisfaction with the Writing Institute. Additionally, one-third of the responses to the open-ended question demonstrated how the Writing Institute helped the participants address academic risk.

Researchers measured the results of the Writing Institute through the WISP, review of the scaled satisfaction survey items, and an open-ended question on the evaluation survey about what the participants found to be most beneficial about the Writing Institute.

**WISP.** In order to determine whether participants' knowledge of writing skills improved during the Institute, the researchers performed repeated measures t-tests<sup>1</sup> on each writing skills element of the WISP. The post-tests showed statistically significant increases in scores across all writing skills elements (see Table 1), including the total score ( $t(63) = 7.874, p = .000$ ). There was an average increase for the 63 participants of 1.4 points on a 16.0 point scale. This means that, on average, students increased their knowledge of a skill by 1.4 points on each skills element. Additional details regarding score differences on each element can be seen in Table 1.

**Satisfaction Survey Scale.** In regards to student satisfaction, every Writing Institute participant either Strongly Agreed or Agreed with the following statements that (a) "Participating in this Institute has encouraged me to continue working on my writing project" and (b) "The book and resource materials were helpful" as seen in Table 2.

Furthermore, the majority of participants (96.8% or more) either Strongly Agreed or Agreed with all the other scaled survey items (Table 2). Also noteworthy was the overwhelmingly positive response to an additional question about the Writing Institute: Almost 99% of

---

<sup>1</sup> The repeated-measures t-test is the appropriate method for evaluating the alternate hypothesis that a significant difference exists between measures taken from two samples that are highly related, in cases where subjects are matched across treatments, or in a single sample where measurements are repeated (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2009). This test is most often used in the evaluation of pre-intervention and post-intervention measurement on a given variable. Since measures of the same individuals violate the assumption of "independence of replicates," the repeated-measures t-test produces a more valid test of hypotheses (von Ende, 1993). Here the null hypothesis that no difference exists in the same sample measured in two different points in time is tested against the alternate hypothesis that a significant change in measures occurred. Measurements on a continuous variable at Time 2 are subtracted from measurement on the same variable at Time 1 to obtain a "difference score." (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2009) The assumption of the null hypothesis tested by this statistical method is that the average of difference scores in a population will be zero.

**Table 1**  
**Differences in pre-and post-test writing scores for all workshop participants**

	Paired Differences					
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference			<i>Sig.</i>
			<i>Lower</i>	<i>Upper</i>	<i>t</i>	
Assignment	0.746	1.425	0.387	1.105	4.155	.000
Prewriting	0.857	2.047	0.342	1.373	3.324	.001
Theory	1.238	2.022	0.729	1.747	4.861	.000
Argument	1.381	2.106	0.851	1.911	5.206	.000
Evidence	0.683	1.767	0.237	1.128	3.065	.003
Organization	1.762	2.212	1.205	2.319	3.322	.000
Paragraph Organization	2.048	2.331	1.461	2.635	6.973	.000
Transition	1.841	2.294	1.263	2.419	6.369	.000
Conclusion	1.762	2.34	1.173	2.351	5.977	.000
Revision	1.349	2.223	0.789	1.909	4.818	.000
Editing	1.270	2.336	0.681	1.858	4.314	.000
Total Score	14.937	15.056	11.145	18.728	7.874	.000

**Table 2**  
**Writing Institute Survey Evaluation Results, 2008-2009**

Evaluation Item	1 (strongly agree) . . . . . 5 (strongly disagree)				
	1	2	3	4	5
Participating in this Institute has encouraged me to continue working on my writing project.	82.5%	17.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Discussion of the topics covered was useful and applicable to my skill level.	74.6%	22.2%	0.0%	3.2%	0.0%
The leaders were sensitive to the needs of the attendees.	76.2%	22.2%	1.6%	0.0%	0.0%
The amount of structure provided by the leaders (exercises, strategies, etc.) was appropriate.	65.1%	33.3%	1.6%	0.0%	0.0%
The book and resource materials were helpful.	85.7%	14.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

\*n=63

the participants stated that the Writing Institute helped them make positive progress either toward the completion of their writing project and/or graduation.

***Open-Ended Question.*** Researchers coded the survey evaluation responses to the open-ended question “What I liked best about the Writing Institute was” in order to look for how the Writing Institute addressed academic risk. Almost one-third of the responses contained phrases associated with academic risk; therefore, we can conclude that discussions and activities surrounding academic risk were useful to the participants. The key terms classified or coded were, on the negative end of the scale, fear, anxiety, and isolation, and on the positive end of the scale, encouragement, motivation, and confidence. The key activities that were coded for included the ones that addressed risk, such as color blocking, cross-disciplinary discussion, free writing, and writing before they were ready to write.

Additionally, the researchers categorized other positive comments, other than risk, as addressing HOCs (18.8%), LOCs (12.5%), the instructors and the format (42.2%), the peer review and the professional writing consultation (26.6%), the materials (14.1%), the lunch (15.6%), and most generally, “all of it” (18.8%). This is significant because we found that the participants were overwhelmingly satisfied with their experience at the Writing Institute.

## Discussion

While contextualized writing assistance as discussed in this research can be helpful on individual projects, the Writing Institute demonstrated that this type of non-contextualized assistance is not only appreciated by graduate students, but it is also effective in addressing the long-term concerns of graduate writers. Though the instruction of the Writing Institute is non-contextualized, it should be noted that none of the content would be considered remediation because the participants were learning new skill sets in terms of writing, revising, and editing large works. More specifically, the Writing Institute provided the participants with a skill set that they can apply to future projects, including drafting techniques, methods of revision, and source management.

The Writing Institute effectively addressed all three problem



areas for graduate writers: HOCs, LOCs, and academic risk. Most activities and discussions throughout the week focused on the students' issues with HOCs because 73% of the participants expressed having difficulty in these areas on their Writing Institute applications. Since the researchers introduced most of the content in a non-disciplinary specific and non-contextualized environment, students were able to first practice these skills and techniques on the projects they brought with them to the Institute and later apply these techniques to future writing endeavors. For example, "color blocking," the free writing activity, and the process analysis activity all helped students understand the importance of prewriting, drafting, and revision techniques. The "blurbing" and "rabbit hole prevention" activities helped those students who struggle with organization, both within individual paragraphs as well as overall organization of their projects. The WISP results confirmed our observations, showing gains in all of these areas with significant gains in overall organization and paragraph organization.

Most LOCs were addressed through brief instruction on passive voice, use of person, and punctuation followed by a question/answer session dictated by the students. They were free to ask questions (without the intimidating presence of an advisor) about any punctuation issues they had or, for example, the appropriate place for first person. It is also interesting to note that most students expressed concerns about the effective use of transitions. We have found that students expected a single transition to magically connect their disparate thoughts. Because of this, the instructors first addressed their problems or questions about organization and then discussed transitions so that students were able to see that transitions came more naturally with a well-organized paper. The WISP results showed that the students gained knowledge about the importance of editing and transitions.

Most importantly, academic risk was addressed during the Writing Institute through its very structure as a cross-disciplinary, non-contextualized workshop/seminar about how challenging writing is at this level. Students responded in their surveys that they were comforted by meeting others with similar struggles, inspired by the confidence they gained during the week, and newly motivated to

complete their projects. They appreciated the techniques that helped them “un-jar the writing process,” helping to relieve some of their anxiety and writing blocks. Most students felt that the help they received with HOCs and LOCs also helped relieve some of the writing risk. One student put it this way: “Although I love the finished product from writing, I really dreaded the process. It has been always full of anxiety for me. Now I am enjoying the process and my anxiety level is much less.”

Mullen (2006) confirms that not only by “revealing personal vulnerabilities,” but also sharing “fruitful ideas and strategies for enabling novice writers to open up and take risks,” (p. 33) students overcome their issues of anxiety and their lack of motivation and confidence. The Writing Institute created an open atmosphere of trust through an intimate setting with fewer than 20 participants that allowed free discussion and inquiry. Additionally, because students were grouped into round tables with those at similar stages in their respective programs, they were free to formulate peer relationships and to feel less isolated. Rose and McClafferty (2001) confirmed this structure in their research by stating that everyone “feels they’re in the same boat-- struggling to make their writing better” (p. 32). The other way that the instructors addressed risk was by opening each week with a discussion of the negative feelings associated with writing, which the participants commonly shared. They then addressed the issues that often cause writing blocks (procrastination, perfectionism, isolation, and stuckness), thereby helping the participants dispel certain myths about writing.

In summary, the structure of the Writing Institute, with its combination of hands-on activities and open discussion in a cross-disciplinary setting, addressed the areas of concern for these graduate writers. Students first overcame academic risk through immediate discussions of shared myths of academic writing, including no “one right way” to write, methods to overcome writing blocks, the importance of daily writing and accountability, and the activity of writing a haiku based on their research. Students addressed HOCs through “blurbing,” freewriting, and “rabbit hole” prevention activities, plus drafting and source management discussions, to name a few. They tackled LOCs through discussion and exemplification of gram-

mar, punctuation, passive voice, person, citation styles, and transitional expressions. The researchers believe that this unique combination of varied content and delivery mechanisms effectively addressed the needs of these graduate students.

### **Limitations and Recommendations**

This study is limited by several factors, including utilizing a self-reported instrument, relying upon a small sample size, not assessing the long-term effects, and only assisting those students who were nearing completion of their graduate studies. Our pre-/posttest consisted of a self-reported inventory instead of an actual writing examination. Although the researchers could have easily chosen to utilize a grammar examination or sample writing to assess each writer, they chose to use the WISP because it served as a teaching tool on the first day of the Institute to highlight the difference between varied writing preferences and essential writing skills. And finally, our survey evaluations were also self-reported levels of satisfaction.

The sample size was small, but the Writing Institutes have continued beyond this initial grant funded period, and the results have been consistent. The researchers recommend measuring the long-term, lasting effects of the Writing Institute. Finally, selecting graduate students nearing completion of their graduate studies and interested in attending the Writing Institute may have caused self-selection bias. However, the original concern in designing the Graduate Writing Institute was not this particular study, but simply to assist those students who felt inclined to improve their writing. Other limitations exist with the four-day writing institute model and how it fits into the span of a semester. Four days for instruction limits what can be accomplished, and it is up to the students to continually apply the strategies they have learned beyond those four days.

The researchers recommend that further research be completed to identify a difference between the results achieved with a cross-disciplinary institute versus an interdisciplinary writing institute. Additionally, there is opportunity to further research academic risk and which coping mechanisms successful graduate students utilize to overcome that issue. Finally, the researchers recommend assessing pedagogical writing knowledge in graduate faculty and developing

methods for enhancing the mentor/mentee academic writing relationship.

### Conclusion

The Writing Institutes have continued since the grant period expired because of their success and popularity. This model of a graduate Writing Institute that addresses the wide range of concerns of graduate students in a non-contextualized environment can be effectively replicated at other institutions in order to serve the changing demographics of the graduate student population. In summary, this student's comment states it best:

The information presented was made simple and easy to understand. I[t] was extremely helpful to breakdown the COMPLEX writing process into digestible and easy to follow steps. While we were all taught these in basic English courses, the application of them in graduate writing escaped our minds. This writing institute re-established those fundamentals of writing back into graduate writing and most importantly provided us with the tools to be successful writers in our field. At least for me, this course has given me the confidence to face my writing fears, and not give so much undo power to the roadblocks in [the] writing process (getting started, writing, re-writing, editing, revising). Thank you for making this course available and for giving me the confidence I needed to get my dissertation done and done well.

### References

- Aronson, A. L., & Swanson, D. L. (1991). Graduate women on the brink: Writing as "Outsiders Within". *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 19, 156-173.
- Bean, J. C. (1996). *Engaging Ideas: The professor's guide to integrating writing, critical thinking, and active learning in the classroom*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Becker, H. S. (1986). *Writing for social scientists: How to start and finish your thesis, book, or article*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago

Press.

- Blakeslee, A. M. (1997). Activity, context, interaction, and authority: Learning to write scientific papers in situ. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 11(2), 125-160.
- Bloom, L. Z. (1981). *Why graduate students can't write: Implications of research on writing anxiety for graduate education*. Paper presented at the meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Dallas, TX.
- Boice, R. (1990). *Professors as writers: A self-help guide to productive writing*. Stillwater, OK: New Forums Press Inc.
- Brus, C. P. (2006). Seeking balance in graduate school: A realistic expectation or a dangerous dilemma? *New Directions for Student Services*, 115, 31-45.
- Council of Graduate Schools (2008) Ph.D. Completion Project: Policies and practices to promote student success: Executive summary. Washington, D.C.: Council of Graduate Schools.
- DiPerro, M. (2007). Excellence in doctoral education: Defining best practices. *College Student Journal*, 41(2), 368-375.
- Faigley, L., & Witte, S. (1981). Analyzing revision. *College Composition and Communication*, 32(4), 400-414.
- Gaillet, L. L. (1996). *Designing a graduate seminar in academic writing*. Paper presented at the meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Milwaukee, WI.
- Gravetter, F.J., & Wallnau, L.B. (2009). *Statistics for the behavioral sciences*. Stamford, CT: Wadsworth Cengage Learning.
- Hadjioannou, X., Shelton, N. R., Fu, D., & Dhanarattigannon, J. (2007). The road to a doctoral degree: Co-travelers through a

perilous passage. *College Student Journal*, 41(1), 160-177.

Hidi, S., & Boscolo, P. (2006). Motivation and writing. In C.A. MacArthur, S. Graham, & J. Fitzgerald (Eds.), *Handbook of writing research*: 144-157. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Kiley, M. (2009). Identifying threshold concepts and proposing strategies to support doctoral candidates. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 46(3), 293-304. doi: 10.1080/14703290903069001

Liechty, J. M., Liao, M., & Schull, C. P. (2009). Facilitating dissertation completion and success among doctoral students in social work. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 45(3), 481-497.

Lovitts, B. E. (2001). *Leaving the ivory tower: The causes and consequences of departure from doctoral study*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

McKinney, M. (2003). *From writer's block to writer's rhythm*. Retrieved from [http://www.successfulacademic.com/webdocs/Get\\_it\\_written.html](http://www.successfulacademic.com/webdocs/Get_it_written.html)

Mullen, C. A. (2006). Best writing practices for graduate students: Reducing the discomfort of the blank screen. *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, 43(1), 30-35.

Nielsen, S. M., & Rocco, T. S. (2002). *Joining the conversation: Graduate students' perceptions of writing for publication*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Adult Education Research Conference, Raleigh, NC.

Pemberton, M.A. (2002). Working with graduate students. In B.B. Silk (Ed.), *The writing center resource manual*: IV.3. Emmitsburg, MD: NWCA Press.

Peters, R. L. (1992). *Getting what you can for: The smart student's guide to*

*earning a master's or Ph.D.* New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

- Richards, P. (1986). Risk. In H. S. Becker (Ed.), *Writing for social scientists: How to start and finish your thesis, book, or article*: 108-120. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Riebschleger, J. (2001). Writing a dissertation: Lessons learned. *Families in Society*, 82(6), 579-582.
- Rose, M. (1984). *Writer's block: The cognitive dimension*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Rose, M., & McClafferty, K. A. (2001). A call for the teaching of writing in graduate education. *Educational Researcher*, 30(2), 27-33.
- Snively, H., Freeman, T., & Prentice, C. (2006). Writing centers for graduate students. In C. Murphy & B.L. Stay (Eds.), *The writing center director's resource book*: 153-163. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Snively, H. (2008). A writing center in a graduate school of education: Teachers as tutors, and still in the middle. In M. Nicolas (Ed.), *(E)Merging identities: Graduate students in the writing center*: 89-102. Southlake, TX: Fountainhead Press.
- Sullivan, P. (1991). Writing in the graduate curriculum: Literary criticism as composition. *Journal of Advanced Composition*, 11(2), 283-299.
- Symons, L. (2007). *Writing Inventory of Skills and Preferences*. Retrieved from <http://www.metacognition.com>
- The University of Texas at San Antonio, Office of Institutional Research (UTSA OIR) (2008). *Fall 2008 fact book*. Retrieved from [http://www.utsa.edu/ir/pdf/factbook/prioryears/UTSA\\_Fact\\_Book\\_2008.pdf](http://www.utsa.edu/ir/pdf/factbook/prioryears/UTSA_Fact_Book_2008.pdf)

The University of Texas at San Antonio, Office of Institutional Research (UTSA OIR) (2011). *Fall 2011 fact book*. Retrieved from [http://www.utsa.edu/ir/pub/factbook/2011/Student\\_Enrollment.pdf](http://www.utsa.edu/ir/pub/factbook/2011/Student_Enrollment.pdf)

Thomas, M. (2012). Graduate students: Defining need and providing appropriate assistance. In K. Agee & R. Hodges (Eds.), *Handbook for training peer tutors and mentors*: 234-236. Mason, OH: Cengage Learning.

Turner, J. D., & Edwards, P. A. (2006). When it's more than you, Jesus, and the pencil: Reflections on an academic writing mentorship. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 50(3), 172-178.

von Ende, C. N.(1993). Repeated-measures analysis: Growth and other time-dependent measures. In S.M. Scheiner & J. Gurevitch (Eds.), *Design and analysis of ecological experiments*: 113-137. London: Chapman and Hall.

Zuber-Skerritt, O., & Knight, N. (1986). Problem definition and thesis writing: Workshops for the postgraduate student. *Higher Education*, 15(1/2), 89-103.



## Appendix A

Day	Activity/ Discussion	Explanation	Need Addressed	Benefit to Student
Day 1	WISP Discussion of Results	The WISP results were explained and normed via a group discussion which led into a discussion of the circular nature of the writing process.	HOC, LOC, & Risk	The WISP served as a self-actualization tool for many of the attendees as they began to understand why they wrote the way they did.
Day 1	Freewriting Exercise	Students participated in a generative freewriting activity, drafted a paragraph from an idea found in the freewriting, and finally revised this paragraph in one of two ways.	HOC & Risk	Attendees experienced different stages in the writing process in this activity including prewriting, drafting, and revision. This last step was helpful because revision was one step in the writing process that many, if not most, of our participants admitted to habitually skipping altogether. The activity also addressed academic risk by allowing them to discuss the merits of writing multiple drafts and of overcoming the idea that there is only “one right way” to convey a specific meaning (Becker, 1986, p.43).
Day 1	Color Blocking	Participants used the text color feature in their word processors for different drafting stages. For example,	HOC & Risk	This discussion/activity gave students a concrete strategy to draft while expecting multiple revisions. Encouraging the participants to draft in different colors

initial drafts may be written in “pink” and would be considered very rough. All subsequent passes might use a different color. The writer can pick as many stages of drafting that they might need.

helped them effectively overcome initial fears of writing (for example, the fear of not getting it down “the one right way”) or any feelings of inadequacy while encouraging them to make multiple revisions.

---

Day 1	Productivity & Accountability	Students were shown research by Boice (1990) about the importance of daily writing and an accountability partner. A discussion about this ensued and students were challenged to notate their writing times for the week.	Risk	This aimed to hold students accountable for their productivity at the Writing Institute and beyond, helping them to work past any “writing blocks” they had.
Day 1	Concrete Language	Students brainstormed words and terms or, more specifically, concrete language associated with their projects—nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs—that would help them focus on the basic who, what, where, when, how, and why of their projects.	LOC & Risk	This was a strategy to help students overcome writing blocks. Returning to these simple yet concrete concepts was a way for the writers to become unblocked by reminding them of their goal and purpose for writing. In addition, having a list of subjects and objects at hand helps students to write more actively and with clarity and concision.

---

Day 1	Haiku	Students attempted to simplify their complex paper topic into a Haiku formatted poem	Risk	Writing about their topics in a new way may help students overcome writing blocks and see their work as a simpler task (McKinney, 2003). It also gave them something to write towards.
Day 2	Process Analysis Exercise	Participants drew a simple picture and then wrote a set of instructions so that their audience could replicate that picture.	HOC	This activity helped illuminate some habits in the students' own writing, such as the tendency to write passively, while opening the discussion to topics like audience, purpose, and logical order.
Day 2	Transitions	Students were exposed to a variety of transition styles and their place and purpose in writing.	HOC	This discussion helped to show students that no matter how good the transition was, if the organization was lacking, the transition would not work.
Day 2	"Blurbing"	Students practiced writing summary statements, or "blurbs," of individual paragraphs in the margins of their own writing.	HOC	These "blurbs" helped illuminate snags in organization as well as paragraph cohesion. For instance, if the order of the blurbs in the margin did not reflect or create an "after the fact" outline, then the paper or section was not logically organized. In addition, if the student writer could not create a blurb in the first place then maybe the paragraph was not cohesive to begin with.

Day 2	“Rabbit Hole” Prevention Method	Participants brainstormed new topics for a paper or a new section of their current paper and divided these topics onto note cards that they could then organize and develop as necessary.	HOC	This activity aimed to help those students who tended to write tangentially. Following these tangents, or “rabbit holes,” is a common problem for graduate writers who like to explore and learn while they write. This activity gave them the opportunity to see which topics would coalesce and which topics they might save for another paper while also helping them with a potential organization schema for the project.
Day 2	Literature Review Structure & Methods	We discussed the purpose and process of writing a literature review, including ways to organize sources by sub-topic, not author.	HOC & Risk	By demystifying how to write a literature review and how to organize it and its sources, the students were able to move past the anxiety that seemed to come with the literature review process.
Day 3	Grammar and Editing Instruction	Though the specific content varied with each of the four Writing Institutes based on students’ self-identified needs, we always covered a few basics based on our own observations while working with graduate writers: Discussion began with the	LOC & Risk	While the obvious benefits of this lesson included a good refresher course on punctuation usage for some and brand new information for others, the unexpected benefit from this day’s discussion concerned Risk. Some participants found it easier to ask a grammar question in an environment like this where everyone was on

various ways to join multiple clauses and then moved on to other troublesome punctuation marks. We made sure to leave time for a question/answer session where students could articulate individual concerns with grammar or editing.

the same level and in the same position. These were questions they may have been hesitant to ask an advisor for fear of seeming somehow incompetent. Many students expressed feelings of relief that they were not the only ones who were confused about a particular usage or comma placement.

---

Day 3	Person Construct- ion and Passive Avoidance	This day always led to a discussion of passive construction in writing, how to identify this construction, and how and why to avoid it when possible. This inevitably led to a discussion of the use of first person in formal writing.	LOC & Risk	This was not a topic that many students were comfortable speaking with their advisors about, but they knew that modern publications were becoming friendlier with first-person and passive avoidance. This discussion was always viewed with a disciplinary lens as many disciplines view passive as a positive, such as the sciences.
Day 4	Plagiarism Avoidance	Students were asked to identify their citation style, which followed with a discussion about the purposes of and differences in citation styles. Additionally, various source management tools were discussed as	HOC	By Day 4, we hoped to have built a trusting environment so that participants could openly discuss any misconceptions they had about when to cite, how to cite, or secondary source citations.

---

a means to avoid plagiarism.

---

Day 4	Source Integration Activity	Participants worked in groups examining the integration of sourced material into three samples of writing.	HOC	This activity helped students to distinguish good synthesis and integration from some not-so-good examples. This activity usually led to a discussion about paraphrasing versus using direct quotations and the benefits of both.
-------	-----------------------------	--	-----	---