

BASIC WRITING INSTRUCTION FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS:

YOU CAN TEACH AN OLD DOG NEW TRICKS

Introduction



The Writing Institute was made possible by a grant from TG and held four times during the grant period, twice over spring break (2008 & 2009) and twice during the Maymester (2008 & 2009).

More than 80 students expressed interest in attending the Writing Institutes and submitted applications. Because several students, of the 73 initially selected, were unable to attend the entire week due to emergencies, sickness, or out of town travel, 63 students successfully completed the Institute.

Graduate Students Writing Issues

- The expectation is that graduate students come into graduate school already writing at a graduate level.
- Graduate students need similar structure and support with their writing as undergraduate students—just at a different level.
- They struggle with:
 - ▣ Academic writing
 - ▣ Conventions of their field
 - ▣ Organizing large ideas
 - ▣ Establishing confidence as a writer
 - ▣ The basics of grammar and punctuation that they haven't looked at in many years (some upwards of 20 years)
 - ▣ Passive voice and how that intersects with “person”

Writing Institute Content Covered

Day 1: Getting Started and Getting Finished

- ▣ The writing process
- ▣ Idea generators & drafting strategies
- ▣ Productivity & accountability
- ▣ Overcoming writing blocks

Day 3: “The Evil Ps”

- ▣ Punctuation
- ▣ Passive
- ▣ Person

Day 2: Organizing You and Your Writing

- ▣ Process analysis
- ▣ Effective source use
- ▣ Transitions
- ▣ Organizing strategies

Day 4: Staying Focused

- ▣ Avoiding repetition & wordiness
- ▣ Peer editing
- ▣ Revision as a process

Writing Inventory of Styles & Preferences (WISP)

The Writing Inventory of Skills and Preferences (WISP), created by Laura Symons, was used as a pre-test and post-test to see if student attitudes toward writing changed and if their approach to important writing skills improved.

The Inventory is divided into two sections, preferences and skills. Every writer has a preferred approach to writing. The more flexible one is about their writing approach, the better chance they have of “receiving the full value of the process and practice of writing.”

Repeated measures t-tests were performed on each writing element in the skills section to determine whether different elements of their writing improved during the workshop. Looking at the improvement in writing skills for the entire group of participants across all semesters that the Writing Institute was offered yields significant improvements in scores across all writing elements (see Table 3).

Results

Table 3: Differences in pre- and posttest writing scores for all workshop participants

	Paired Differences				t	Sig.
	Mean	Std. Deviation	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference			
			Lower	Upper		
Assignment	.746	1.425	.387	1.105	4.155	.000
Prewriting	.857	2.047	.342	1.373	3.324	.001
Theory	1.238	2.022	.729	1.747	4.861	.000
Argument	1.381	2.106	.851	1.911	5.206	.000
Evidence	.683	1.767	.237	1.128	3.065	.003
Organization	1.762	2.212	1.205	2.319	6.322	.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	2.340	1.173	2.351	5.977	.000
Revision	1.349	2.223	.789	1.909	4.818	.000
Editing	1.270	2.336	.681	1.858	4.314	.000
Total score	14.937	15.056	11.145	18.728	7.874	.000

Satisfaction

All Writing Institute participants were surveyed right after the Institute. Every Writing Institute participant either *Strongly Agreed* or *Agreed* with the following:

- ▣ **Participating in this Institute has encouraged me to continue working on my writing project.**
- ▣ **The book and resource materials were helpful.**

96.9% of the participants either *Strongly Agreed* or *Agreed* with the following:

- ▣ **Discussion of the topics covered was useful and applicable to my skill level.**

Also noteworthy about the Writing Institute was that 98.5% of the participants said that the Writing Institute helped them make **positive progress either toward the completion of their writing project (80%) and/or graduation (46.2%).**

Sample Student Feedback

"The information presented was made simple and easy to understand. I 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 writing process (getting started, writing, re-writing, editing, and revising). Thank you for making this course available and for giving me the confidence I needed to get my dissertation done and done well."


Conclusion




Because of the statistical evidence and positive student satisfaction and feedback the Writing Institutes have been institutionalized and will be continued in the future, beyond our grant period. They have also spurred conversations about other advanced writing workshops for incoming graduate students and ESL/international graduate students.

References

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“I feel that this workshop has helped me improve my writing skills and focus on what is necessary and what is not.”



"The writing institute helped me identify the cause of my writing blocks and gave me the tools to overcome them. Now I am writing every day and I have more to write than I had ever imagined. 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. Thank You!!!!!"