

Professional Writing in Graduate School: Faculty versus Student Expectations and Recommendations

*Nancy Leffel Carlson, E. Jane Irons, Pamela Monk
Lamar University*

Academic writing skills are those used in formal papers for course assignments, theses, dissertations, and articles that may be submitted to professional journals or conference proposals. University faculty and student expectations concerning writing assignments differ. This study investigated graduate student perceptions of their writing knowledge, skills, and abilities.

Background and Literature Review

Teaching writing could have considerable impact in teacher education and educational leadership programs. The emphasis of teaching writing, the practice of writing, and the impact on student achievement is well documented by the National Writing Project (NWP) (Lieberman & Friedrich, 2007; Manzo, 2008 August; Whyte, Lazarte, Thompson, Ellis, Muse, & Talbot, 2007 summer). These authors report that writing is a tool that unlocks students' critical thinking, analytical skills, and creativity.

Teacher Preparation and Writing

Emphasizing writing skills in teacher education and educational leadership programs may be linked to improvement in test performance and student academic achievement in writing (Whyte et al, 2007). Whyte and colleagues (2007) reported that National Writing Project (NWP) related programs for preservice and novice teachers were effective in improving writing skills for both teachers and their students. These authors reported that professional development emphasizing writing skills in a community of practice involving university faculty and experienced teachers proved to be effective in improving their teaching of writing.

Abbate-Vaughn (2007, summer) studied general and academic writing skills of preservice graduate students in teacher preparation and educational leadership programs. Implications for teacher preparation programs included the ongoing need to assess writing skills and program supports for student writing throughout the teacher preparation program. Abbate-Vaughn reported that a disconnect between teacher education students' perceptions of their writing skills and their actual performance might indicate the need for program supports throughout teacher preparation and educational leadership programs.

Support for emphasizing teaching writing skills in higher education, particularly to graduate level teacher education and educational leadership students, resulted in competent teachers and educational leaders (Abbate-Vaughn, 2007 summer; Gallavan, Bowles, & Young, 2007; Rose & McClafferty, 2001). Gallavan and others reported that teacher candidates want instruction in writing; specifically, they want to be taught how to write, how to communicate, and how to teach writing to their P-12 students. Teacher candidates want to be taught how to integrate writing across the curriculum and how to grow through writing. Instruction that shapes how a teacher candidate teaches writing is most often found in methods courses in teacher education course syllabi, while other courses such as reading and teaching literature include writing instruction for teacher candidates (Hochstetler, 2007 summer).

Student Expectations

Students attend college or university with their own expectations about their educational activities, assignments, and involvement. Collier and Morgan (2008) found that college students must understand and master the role of being a college student and they must understand the expectations of professors and

respond accordingly through their academic performance. Furthermore, these authors reported that students either discounted or ignored the importance of things professors said and often misinterpreted or reinterpreted professor's instructions. Collier and Morgan reported that students emphasized the need to fit school work in to their busy schedules and lives instead of focusing first on their education (2000).

Students reported that they did not receive enough detailed information on how to write, specific instruction in writing style or technical skill, and format for papers (Collier & Morgan, 2008). Some students' expectations of the professor included a very detailed explanation of the course syllabus and course assignments. Students agreed they did not receive enough information about how to write and expressed their frustrations about receiving low evaluations of their writing performance on class assignments (2008).

Undergraduates were sensitive to faculty grading practices of writing assignments (Holmes & Smith, 2003; Smith, 2008). The students read teacher's comments about their writing and wanted both positive and negative feedback to apply to future writing assignments. Students preferred a rubric or matrix with grading criteria which indicated an objective and fair approach to assessing writing skills (Smith, 2008). Student complaints about faculty grading practices indicated that faculty did not give enough guidance for improvement of future assignments and some faculty "bled red all over" papers with excessive comments (Holmes & Smith, p.321).

Students perceived effective assessment of their writing assignments by faculty would include the basics of respect and fairness where there was a balance between criticism and support (Smith, 2008). Implications for writing instruction suggest that students appreciated the time faculty devoted to grading writing assignments. Further, students appreciated comments that were coupled with respect and kindness. Taking time to comment on writing assignments improved faculty-student interaction (Smith).

Faculty Expectations

Collier and Morgan (2008) reported on faculty expectations of students' performance in higher education classrooms. These authors found that higher education faculty had the expectation that students will come to college with prerequisite writing skills that can transfer from general writing to professional writing on demand. Furthermore, these authors found faculty reported becoming frustrated with students' difficulty in comprehending the faculty's basic expectations. Consequently, faculty has added information and detail to their syllabi because students desired that it be as explicit as possible (Collier & Morgan).

Collier and Morgan (2008) noted that faculty often found students did not follow directions that were clearly written and provided to them regarding assignments and course expectations. Additionally, areas that emerged as faculty expectation concerns regarding student performance included workload and priorities, the explicitness of expectations and assignments, and issues related to communication. Collier and Morgan found faculty had expectations that students would come to class knowing basic writing skills such as spelling, grammar, sentence structure, and basic writing style. Additionally faculty expected graduate students to have knowledge about references, citations, and use of accepted guidelines such as APA or MLA writing style (Collier & Morgan).

Caffarella and Barnett (2000) reported that university faculty assumed that doctoral students either begin graduate studies as proficient writers or developed the required writing skills during their programs. These authors further reported "that faculty are shocked to find many graduate students not only do not write like scholars, but they also may not think like scholars" (p. 39). The lack of scholarly writing skills were further compounded by doctoral candidates who were actively practicing as educational leaders and did not have time in their busy schedules to conduct research or practice writing. In addition, some graduate students may not be exposed to the process or technical aspects of scholarly writing until their dissertation. Some faculty describe this as "too little too late" (Caffarella & Barnett, p. 40).

Academic Writing

Lavelle and Guarino (2003) reported that academic writing has long been used as a method for instruction and evaluation in higher education. Writing strategies, differentiating between deep writing (such as making new meaning or complex revision) and surface writing (duplicating or reproducing lists or facts) , focusing on structural complexity in writing outcomes, and assessment of writing skill were facets of academic writing and demand the writer's full concentration (Lavelle & Guarino). Ongoing

practice and review was a necessary part of improving writing skill: Lavelle and Guarino (2003) stated “Active, comprehensive revision is the defining element of deep writing (p. 302).” These authors recommend that effective writing instruction included an environment that specified meaningful writing as an expectation, and included rubrics based on deep criteria.

Requirements. Requirements of academic writing for educational leaders and university faculty include both books and journal articles. Writing on familiar topics or personal interest yielded easier and better writing (Brown, 2008; Caron, 2008; Johnson, 2004; Ritchie & Rignao, 2007). Lei (2008) reported a successful method of improving writing skills that included joint research and authorship efforts for research conferences and peer-reviewed journals between graduate students and faculty mentors. “Studying practical educational issues have provided additional motivations and research opportunities to students, thus transforming their confidence into performance and achievement in the form of journal and symposium article publications” (Lei, p. 677).

Collaboration. Ritchie and Rignano (2007) and Johnson (2004) reported on the advantage of the co-authorship between a mentor and a protégé. Examples of mentoring or assisting a new author in writing activities may be as simple as offering co-authorship of a paper or presentation where the mentor assists the new author in the learning process, discovering his/her writing style, orchestrating the writing, and navigating the publication process (Johnson). The advantages of collaborating on writing activities included intellectual satisfaction, improving each author’s skills, and enjoyment in the collaboration (Johnson; Ritchie & Rignano).

The Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate students’ perceptions and faculty expectations of professional writing abilities of graduate students at master’s and doctoral degree program levels. The investigation included a survey of student perceptions of writing capabilities and skills that can transfer from general writing ability to professional writing on demand.

Methodology

The methodology used for this study was survey research. A written survey instrument was given to graduate students in doctoral and master’s degree programs in the college of education at a Texas university.

Survey Instrument

The writing skills survey included a two part questionnaire. Part I contained 20 questions requiring responses on a Likert scale of (1) to (5). Students rated their writing skills where response (1) indicated unsatisfactory skills and response (5) indicated outstanding skills relative to their perception of their own academic writing skills.

Part II, included a short open-ended response of about two written paragraphs describing the learning progress in accomplishing academic writing. The respondents reflected on two questions:

1. What was helpful in accomplishing academic writing?
2. What do you need to accomplish academic writing?

For the purposes of this study, academic writing skills were defined as those utilized in formal papers. In a writing for publication course, graduate students were required to write articles they might submit to professional journals or conference proposals for which an established writing style, in this case, American Psychological Association, was required.

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Limitations are shortcomings or weaknesses that the researcher could not control on the part of the participants, school setting, and/or reporting methods (Thomas & Nelson, 1996). Delimitations are conditions or limitations imposed by the researcher on the scope of the study (Thomas & Nelson, 1996). The assumptions, limitations, and delimitations of this study are consistent with survey research methods and are:

1. The survey was distributed in a non-random manner to three graduate classes in southeast Texas.
2. The survey was distributed as a one-time data collection with no follow-up interviews with the respondents.

3. Completing the survey was voluntary and done in an honest effort by the participating students.
4. Respondents were from the three selected graduate classes and may not be representative of the general population, of educators or non-educators, or other graduate students at this university or other universities.
5. Respondents' perceptions of writing skills were self-reported and writing abilities were not measured on a formal writing assessment instrument.

Sample and Data Collection

The sample was of convenience where students in three graduate classes were asked to voluntarily complete a writing survey instrument to rate their perception of their professional writing skills and abilities. Students completed the survey on their own time and returned the survey forms anonymously.

Respondent Characteristics

The respondents included 80 graduate students in doctoral and master's degree programs in the college of education at a Texas university. The master's degree students included students in a post baccalaureate teacher certification program who have university degrees in areas other than education and are now seeking teacher certification. The doctoral and master's degree students write formal papers for course assignments, theses, and articles they might submit to professional journals or conference proposals for which an established writing style, in this case, American Psychological Association (APA), is required.

Of the respondents 52.5% were doctoral candidates in an educational leadership program. These students were practicing principals, superintendents, and counselors. The remaining 47.5% students were post baccalaureate and/or master's degree candidates in teacher education.

Results

Data Analysis and Findings

Results were reported using descriptive statistics. Student responses regarding their perceptions of academic writing abilities and skills were reported in five sections. The sections were 1) technical writing skill; 2) writing style skill; 3) research application skill; 4) American Psychological Association (APA) writing style skill; and 5) editing skill. Reflective responses from Part II of the survey were included in this section.

Technical writing skill. Most of the graduate students reported their technical writing skills are strong. Over 96% of the students reported that the sentence structure and length were sophisticated and varied. Over 92% of the graduate students reported that spelling, punctuation, and grammar were important and were accurately addressed in their writing. About 7% of the graduate students reported that their technical writing skills in using grammar and spelling were weak or marginal.

Writing style skill. The graduate students responded that their perceptions of their writing style skills were strongest in the areas of adequately supporting their writing points, writing a clear introductory paragraph, and being able to differentiate between opinion and fact. The graduate students reported that their perceptions of their greatest weaknesses in writing style were using transitions throughout their writing and summarizing information adequately.

Research application skill. The graduate students responded that their perceptions of their writing skills in research applications were very strong. Over 98% of the students reported that they clearly understood and avoided plagiarism throughout their writing. Over 97% reported that they were able to use various databases in conducting a literature review. The weakest area in research application skills reported by the graduate students was conducting a literature review. Approximately 6% reported weakness in conducting and integrating a literature review using 15 or more sources.

American Psychological Association (APA) writing style skill. The college of education requires graduate students to use the APA writing style. Over 90% of the graduate students reported that their perceptions of their abilities in using the APA writing style was strongest in the areas of using headings and subheadings and citing references correctly within the text and in the reference section. Using tables and figures in the APA writing style was reported by 23% of the students as their weakest area.

Editing skill. Graduate students perceived a high degree of skill in the ability to edit one another's writing with over 93% reporting proficiency in this skill area. This skill area included the perception of

being able to identify strengths and weaknesses in other students' writing and offering assistance in writing. Approximately six percent of graduate students showed weakness in the area of editing and assisting others in their writing.

Selected Reflections

Part II of the survey included a short, approximately two paragraph written response. The reflection questions were designed based on collaboration among the professors and were intended to obtain actual writing samples from the graduate students as well as their perceptions of their writing abilities. The graduate students were asked to respond with a short reflection about their learning progress in accomplishing academic writing. Selected responses were included under two sections, 1) reflections on writing instruction; and 2) reflections on student perceived needs.

Reflection on writing instruction. The following reflections are representative of the graduate students' perceptions of what was helpful in their writing instruction. Misspellings and abbreviations were retained in the quotations to reflect the accuracy of reporting the respondents' writing samples. Reflections are grouped in two areas: writing instruction and practice, and individual guidance in writing.

Respondents wrote that their perception of receiving writing instruction and writing practice was extremely helpful. Many of the students indicated weakness in specific areas such as knowledge of copyright and plagiarism, and instruction and practice in these areas was much appreciated. Selected comments from respondents included:

"Having to produce 'publish ready' articles is the best trainer for journal publishing, in my opinion."

"Review of copyright was well covered."

"I learned as much from the incorrect writing samples as I learned from the correct ones."

"The writing labs were particularly helpful in understanding plagiarism, because I did not have an understanding of what constitutes plagiarism. I am embarrassed to admit that I thought plagiarism was simply the act of not citing a source and trying to pass someone else's written work off as your own. I was shocked to realize plagiarism is much more than this..."

Respondents wrote that individual writing instruction and guidance was helpful in teaching writing and improving existing writing skills. Respondents were particularly appreciative of individual, one-on-one instruction in areas of weakness and identifying how to improve their individual writing skills. Selected comments from respondents included:

"The part of this process that was the most helpful and most beneficial was the ever present guidance and feedback."

"I was pleased with the amount of information I obtained by evaluating the academic writing of others."

"The most helpful was peer review. Peer review caused me to put more effort into creating as well as critiquing an article."

Reflection on student perceived needs. The following reflections are representative of the graduate students' perceptions of what was needed in their writing instruction. Misspellings and abbreviations are retained in the quotations to reflect the accuracy of reporting the respondents' writing samples. Graduate students' reflections indicate that the respondents need technical writing instruction including APA writing style. Selected comments from respondents included:

"I need more of the technical aspects of reporting quantitative results. I have limited understanding of using tables and charts to report numerical/statistical data."

"Being expected to learn how to write and read research in my Master's program gave me a great foundation to take to the next level in the program. So, I suggest that M. Ed. programs greatly beef up their expectations and requirements in this area. If you enter a doctoral program and do not know how to write an abstract or APA, your Master's program was lacking."

“Professors often assume as college students we have learned about grammar but have not.”

“I have been spoiled by spell checker. My writing would be better if I completed the final draft a day before it is due.”

Respondents also indicated assistance was needed in the technical aspects of conducting and reporting on research such as performing literature reviews and gathering and writing about data. Selected comments from respondents included:

“I need more training on all of the different ways to access data.”

“In addition to format, I find that one of my greatest challenges is finding exactly what I need in the literature. It is often time consuming when I attempt to obtain the necessary information needed to complete a particular objective that I have before me.”

“I need a general model for a literature review.”

Conclusion and Implications

Graduate student perceptions of their writing skills and abilities were over-stated based on student ratings of their writing and actual samples provided. Findings clearly support the literature. For example, most of the graduate students in this study reported their technical writing skills, such as using grammar and spelling, were strong; however, writing samples and course assignments often indicate weakness in these areas. Students perceived that their writing needs included instruction in specific areas such as APA writing style and individual guidance in their writing practice. Students were genuinely appreciative of the time and effort the professors gave to individual instruction to improve writing skills.

The overall perception of the graduate students in education suggested that they have a high degree of confidence in their academic writing abilities. Faculty differed with these perceptions. Students felt their weakest areas included technical writing skills such as grammar, punctuation, and spelling. Additionally, these students perceived their greatest weakness was using the APA writing style. Faculty agreed with this perception. Most graduate students have had little experience with writing for publication.

Findings from these graduate students about their skill levels may be useful in evaluating existing instruction provided in academic writing and designing future writing instruction for theses, dissertations, and articles that could be submitted to journals for publication.

The process of inviting students to evaluate their existing skills and future instructional needs may be valuable in the design of future instruction. The ultimate goal of graduate courses is to provide high quality instruction in the various skill areas, including writing instruction for educational leaders. Graduate students must be accomplished in their own skills before they can be leaders in transferring this skill to others. These findings suggest a need for emphasis on professional writing to include use of APA format. Additionally, these findings may have implications for high quality and highly qualified teacher training and professional development.

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