Best Practices in Academic Writing: 3P Writing Philosophy

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Introduction

There is a significant national skills gap between good students with effective writing skills and those who struggle with academic writing. According to Aitchison (2009), graduate schools expect their students to be proficient in academic and research skills. Graduate schools are discovering that students are ill equipped to handle the rigorous demands of scholarly writing and research. Perkins and Lowenthal (2014) found graduate students share similar struggles and challenges in academic writing. The three most common areas of struggle among graduate students are motivation, procrastination, and time management concerns. Di Pierro (2011) found “students need a toolbox equipped with the right instruments for the right purpose at the right time” (p.12). Thus, in graduate school, an underlying cause of mediocre writing is the lack of tools for addressing the problem. According to Mullen (2006), graduate students are neophytes in academic writing and need resources to guide them in the writing process. This paper will provide a developmental tool to assist students with writing challenges and produce effective scholarly writing. The 3P Writing Philosophy is a supplemental strategy to ensure students have resources to address their writing needs. The 3P’s are based on purpose, persistence and peer support to provide a simple framework to advance student’s writing skills. The 3P Writing Philosophy is grounded in research that impacts graduate student’s motivation, organization, and quality of academic writing.

Literature Review

Student challenges and intervention strategies help demonstrate scholarly work however, almost two-thirds of graduate students cannot write a literature review (Switzer & Perdue, 2012). Graduate students should be able to research a topic, organize the research, and synthesize it.
Roberts (2010) confirmed this by declaring graduate students need to put in the necessary hard work to get the job done. Therefore, it is imperative that graduate students have the necessary skills to keep up with the writing process. Students identified with one or more categories including procrastinators, binge writers, and prolific writers. College students engage in academic procrastination quite regularly and Jiao, DaRos-Voseles, Collins & Onwuegbuzie (2011 p. 120) stated “academic procrastination has been a prevalent phenomenon on colleges and university campuses for decades.” As a result, students who struggle tend to have an aversion to the task of daily writing and tend to accept any reason or excuse to not write. Zarick and Stonebraker (2009) confirmed procrastinators are susceptible to task aversion, salience, and uncertainty when it comes to papers and projects.

Procrastinators have a desire to write, but do not demonstrate daily commitment to their writing. Roberts (2010 p. 13) defined commitment as “the willingness to do whatever it takes to achieve your goal” This lack of commitment is a concern for both procrastinators and their academic advisors. Another concern with procrastinators is a need for perfection. Burka and Yuen (1983) contended that the first belief in the procrastinator’s code is the need for perfection. Thus, a graduate student who is procrastinating about the writing process has an unrealistic expectation of being able to create a perfect paper on the first draft. In brief, the misconception of being perfect exacerbates the academic procrastination problem (Burka & Yuen, 1983; Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Smith, Maroney, Nelson, Abel & Abel, 2006). Consequently, procrastinators fail to produce any results towards pre-writing, revising and editing their papers.

Another student writer category is binge writers and presents a unique developmental challenge. Leading national research on faculty development, particularly scholarly productivity and academic writing, (Boice, 1992, 1995) has shown that binge writing is ineffective because
days, sometimes weeks, go by without any substantial writing being done. In addition, there is mental stress and anxiety to write in order to make up for times of writing inactivity. Unfortunately, students who are binge writers tend to take long gaps or breaks in the writing process. Silvia (2007) asserted that binge writers are motivated by guilt and anxiety and do not enjoy the writing process. In addition, binge writers are not nearly as effective as students who write on a daily basis. Students who write on a daily basis produce more pages and have a greater opportunity to attain their writing goals (Berk, 2010; Bolker, 1998). Prolific writers at last are the antithesis of procrastinators and binge writers. Students who are prolific writers tend to achieve the greatest writing gain because they put writing first. On a psychological level, these students have a completion mindset (Green & Bowden, 2012). Similarly, on a physical level, students appreciated a writing space or environment where their writing is rewarding and productive.

Stay organized with a checklist, calendar for deadlines, daily output target, and filing system (Belcher, 2009b; Gray & Drew, 2012; Swaggerty, Atkinson, Faulconer, & Griffith, 2011). Graduate students are encouraged to write again because they can view and record their daily progress. Silvia (2007) asserted that a daily writing schedule keeps prolific writers on task and, therefore, they are more apt to meet their writing deadlines. Successful students support writing as a process by doing constant revisions and editing. These students are unafraid to start over again if the writing goal is not met in the paper. Moreover, they encourage feedback from family, peers, and faculty (Hillard, 2013; Kania-Gosche & Leavitt, 2011). Subsequently, when the paper is ready for submission, prolific writers will often procure a professional editor. Di Pierro (2011) cited successful graduate writing included several key elements and a skilled editor
to guide the student during the writing process. Generally, a successful graduate student becomes a prolific writer as a result of experiencing each category.

Student Challenges

While applicable to all writers, graduate students demonstrated three main challenges regarding their academic writing including isolation, time management, and lack of organizational skills (Green & Bowden, 2012; Lei, 2009; Patterson, Mallett, & McFadden, 2012). Any one challenge, or all three, may impact a graduate student’s ability to write a scholarly paper of high quality. Because of the need for extensive research and the ambiguous nature of the paper, students feel isolated during the writing process. Patterson, Mallett, and McFadden (2012) asserted that group collaboration allows a student to overcome the isolation time. According to national research, graduate students experience social and or intellectual isolation. Socially, graduate students miss their peer interaction while working on their academic writing and empathize with each other more than a non-graduate student (Powers & Swick, 2012). Intellectually, graduate students miss the engaged faculty feedback. Faculty members who are accessible and attentive to their student needs can affect them on an intellectual level. Research has shown that intellectual support structures such as online chat groups, writing workshops, and alumni mentoring sessions can address the isolation concern (Barnes & Austin, 2009; Kania-Gosche & Leavitt, 2011; Patterson, Mallett & McFadden, 2012).

Another challenge is time management skills to perform in organized and purposeful activities. Students should have an action plan and organize their thoughts before they start their academic writing (Di Pierro, 2007; Silvia, 2007). The majority of students struggle with academic writing because it requires extensive research, the ability to identify common themes, and data collection and management. As a result, more graduate students who are impatient with
the writing process tend to take shortcuts because they lack organizational skills. Good organizational skills help students have a system in place. Keeping materials organized promotes the students ability to focus. Graduate students identified the importance of time management, work/life balance and the relationship with their advisor. West, Gokalp, Pena, Fischer, & Gupton (2011) surveyed 112 graduate students about how to seek out support services when they faced challenges. Resources were provided to students including sample timelines and action plans to complete different tasks. Technical support and training was designed to fit the needs of full-time students. The student advisor provided peer support to avoid social isolation and identify writing deficiencies.

Intervention Strategies

Intervention strategies are essential to assist graduate students in moving forward successfully through the academic writing process. These strategies are critical because they will provide valuable insight into what graduate students can expect and what needs to be done to alleviate unnecessary hardship or suffering. Lei (2009) confirmed this by describing how graduate students can use strategies for finding and selecting topics for a thesis or dissertation. If students and institutions do not implement these strategies in the beginning of the masters or doctorate degree program, then the attrition rates will increase. Ampaw and Jaeger (2012) stated that doctoral students need academic support during each phase of the doctoral thesis. In 2011, Kania-Gosche and Leavitt conducted a study on how to assist graduate students with their writing process and degree completion rates. The strategy used in this study was the dissertation workshop model. Students had to attend 8 of 16 workshops on different topics, such as motivation and writing. Workshop course assignments included daily reflection papers which demonstrated students’ skills development. Workshop materials were available online for easy
access to students. The major findings revealed there was greater student productivity regarding the writing process. Of the 36 students in the class, 24 attended eight or more workshops, and 11 students attended ten or more workshops. Some participants submitted up to 50 pages while others wrote nothing. The data indicated that students felt more comfortable with the overall writing process and a need for further development.

The 3P Writing Philosophy

Successful academic writing demands commitment to time management, organization skills and consistent effort. Graduate students should move from procrastination to prolific writers by implementing the 3P Writing Philosophy. The 3P’s are based on best practices and evidence-based recommendations. The 3P Writing Philosophy of purpose, persistence and peer support addresses some of the students’ writing deficiencies such as procrastination and writer’s block. A graduate student has a purpose in the writing process besides attaining a grade or degree. If the topic is relevant and interesting, the student will remain motivated to write about the topic. According to Mays and Smith (2009), a research topic is difficult work for graduate and research students. Therefore, graduate students should have viable and interesting topics to present in their academic writing. In fact, Ali and Kohun (2007) declared that graduate students should select one topic that is manageable to develop for their paper.

Graduate students must have a purpose or a clear objective in mind when starting their academic writing and should write with purpose in their writing (Cuthbert, Spark, & Burke, 2009; Mullen, 2006; Graff & Birkenstein, 2006). For instance, a clear objective helps graduate students determine the purpose of this study. This is essential because graduate students tend to veer off the writing path. Once drafted correctly, a purpose will provide graduate students with one of the rudimentary parts of the paper. Finally, the topic and purpose should be relevant to the
author’s target audience. In graduate education or research, a scholarly audience can include students, faculty, researchers, or administrators. A scholarly audience is interested in reading about new research contributions or finding other areas of study for further research. Sword (2012) stated the attention to audience is a hidden, but essential, ingredient in academic writing. In addition, purpose and audience are interrelated in academic writing (Swales & Feak, 2004). Glatthorn and Joyner (2005) discussed how personal purpose is achieved when students actually learn while they are writing. In sum, the focus needs to be on a deep learning or understanding of the writing process, and not on just completing the writing project.

Persistence

An underestimated transition step for graduate students after the paper’s purpose, is the need for persistence. Hunt and Milson (2011) declared persistence is a key component in completing scholarly work and getting published. Therefore, graduate students should hold themselves accountable for the successful completion of their scholarly writing project and not rely on the graduate school, faculty advisors, or editors. In fact, the ability to endure through the writing process is an important skill towards writing completion. Belcher (2009a) acknowledged graduate students should learn how to maintain focus and finish their writing projects. Similarly, the persistent writer will sit down to write at the desk or computer even when they are not motivated. Likewise, graduate students who are immersed in the writing process tend to achieve higher levels of persistence. Salas (2009) asserted that graduate students must embrace the writing process in order to overcome the challenges on the writing journey. Furthermore, Haggerty (2010) described how graduate students have to confront personal and academic challenges during the writing process. Academic writing for graduate students can be a juggling act between work, family, writing or health priorities. Successful graduate students complete
their writing while navigating through various priorities. To create and maintain persistence, graduate students learn to commit to their scholarly writing pursuits while living their lives.

Peer Support

Some graduate students can be ambivalent toward academic writing. One reason why is because of the uncertainty experienced in the writing process. Therefore, peer support is an essential strategy to graduate students in the academic writing process. Administrators and faculty members should create support groups to assist graduate students with their writing assignments (Plakhotnik & Rocco, 2012). For example, a peer support group may consist of one person or a small group of people. Holley and Caldwell (2012) declared that graduate students should have formal and informal peer support sessions to share and learn from each other. Subsequently, peer support addresses two major areas of concern for graduate students: lack of motivation and stress. Thus, peer support fosters not only professional collaboration, but personal as well.

The first area of concern peer support addresses is the lack of motivation. Self-motivation is an emotional competency that is vital to students in completing graduate work (Kania-Gosche & Leavitt, 2011; O’Meara, Knudsen, & Jones, 2013). Some students can motivate themselves and some cannot sustain it. The unmotivated student tends to find writing difficult and is unable to complete their graduate programs. Peer support groups can offer a means for students to reclaim their sense of purpose through encouragement and listening opportunities. Institutions that address their students’ motivation may positively impact completion rates. The other area of concern peer support addresses is stress. Graduate students who are under stress tend to need more emotional support (Gardner, 2009). Stress is an important concern because it affects not only health, but academic performance too. In fact, graduate students who perceive the stress as
excessive are very likely to discontinue their degree programs (Smith, Maroney, Nelson, Abel & Abel, 2006). In sum, peer support groups can foster self-motivation and alleviate stress.

In conclusion, academic writing is a large part of a graduate student’s career. A recurring theme in graduate education is that students lack effective writing skills to become scholarly writers. In graduate school, one of the underlying causes of mediocre writing is the lack of tools for addressing this issue. Students commonly struggle in the areas of motivation, procrastination and time management. In order to receive a degree, graduate students are required to do scholarly work for their courses and thesis. Unfortunately, many students are unable to complete this requirement. Although academic writing is a difficult process, the 3P Writing Philosophy of purpose, persistence, and peer support is a strategy that will assist students with their writing deficiencies. The 3Ps proven strategy guides students through the writing process by showing them how to stay focused on their paper’s purpose, emphasizing a persistent mindset while decreasing procrastination, and reducing social isolation through a collaborative process of peer support. Students will ultimately form a different perspective toward their academic writing while using this essential resource. Academic leaders and advisors can support graduate student’s academic writing needs by providing them with the tools to improve productivity.
References


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