

## **Helping Graduate Students Become Successful Writers: A Graduate Writing Center Deploys both Disciplinary Writing Consultants and Generalists to Best Meet Disciplinary Writing Needs**

**Introduction: Enrico Sassi. *Director of NDSU's Graduate Center for Writers.***

Welcome. Our panel are all from the Graduate Center for Writers at North Dakota State University (NDSU), and we will discuss how our writing center helps graduate students, especially as they endeavor to write in their disciplines. First a little context, though, especially since, like many writing centers, ours is substantially shaped by our institution, by the context in which we exist.

NDSU is a land-grant institution, one of two major research universities in North Dakota. We have 14,000+ students, of which some 2,500 are graduates. Significantly, when I was hired eight years ago, the university had just gone through a decade of extreme growth, which saw a doubling of the number of PhD programs and a tripling of research funding.

The after-effects of this rapid growth were being felt (they still are today). At the graduate level, these after-effects were marked by faculty concern about their graduate students' ability to write adequately. An ad-hoc task force was convened by the dean of the graduate school, and it made two major recommendations: to develop writing center services for graduate students and to teach a graduate writing class.

I was hired and given these two tasks, likely because I had taught almost all kinds of university writing, most recently at the University of Michigan's business school. But much of my experience has been in industry and business, especially in project management, and this element turned out to be more useful in my new tasks than was knowledge of how to teach writing.

Thus, I was hired half-time to develop our writing center to serve graduate students and to teach a graduate writing class. 2,000 graduate students, a half-time hire—the problem of graduate writing was apparently taken care of. I will digress for a moment to reflect on the place of graduate writing at our university, and from what I see at conferences like this one, we are not alone:

A space alien visiting our university would be confused by graduate education. Graduate students clearly need to develop proficiency in three areas: they must acquire disciplinary knowledge; they must be able to successfully conduct research; and they must be able to communicate their knowledge and findings in published papers, theses, and dissertations. They also need to communicate throughout the process of inquiry and with collaborators and other disciplinarians. What would confuse our alien is that disciplinary knowledge is clearly addressed by a required curriculum. This curriculum also addresses research through research courses, credits, and, often, exams. But the communication part seems forgotten, unless osmosis from literature and advisers can be considered a structured plan.

It was evident that to actually develop graduate writing support, we could not rely on what had been done before. It felt a little like being a small entrepreneur in the East Block toward the end of the Soviet era. There clearly was a need—an early survey of university and department leaders concluded resoundingly: All graduate students need help with writing, and some need a lot of help! But there was no institutional structure for graduate writing work, so our writing center began a grassroots effort in which we reached out to students and faculty to identify specific needs and provide support. Using what business folks like to call leverage, we worked our way up to departments and, finally, colleges. Our current work depends both on support from the above stakeholders and on partial funding from colleges and departments.

Seven years ago, our graduate writing consulting staff consisted of three English MA TAs, who we bought out of half of basic composition teaching assignments. These writing consultants worked with undergraduate and graduate students, but for the latter, they could not provide the disciplinary writing support that was needed—they mostly ended up working on grammar issues with international students. Dedicated and bright as they were, our consultants could not address the needs of our graduate student body—just imagine an English MA student providing guidance to a chemistry PhD student on her dissertation. Today, our staff is 6-8 PhD students and lecturers, three of whom are disciplinary writing consultants (more about them below). Annually, we conduct approximately 1,700 one-on-one sessions with some 320 graduate students. Our workshops have increased from three a year to over 40, and we teach four one- or two-credit classes.

A key concern for us was addressing the disciplinary writing needs of students. In the past, both students and faculty had expressed frustration that consultants were completely unfamiliar with disciplinary expectations. In other words, the graduate students need help with scholarship, not commas. So we developed what we call disciplinary writing consultants (DWCs). These consultants come from, or have extensive knowledge of, a discipline (for logistical and funding reasons, a “discipline” for us is a college). The DWCs work 10 hrs/week providing one-on-one sessions for students in their college/discipline. They then spend 10 hrs/week working on writing support and initiatives that are needed by the college. The first semester working with a college, a DWC will conduct a needs assessment to determine what interventions are most useful, and s/he will implement them in subsequent semesters.

Our DWCs have extended our center’s reach across the university and increased the perceived value of our work. However, we have also realized that our “generalist consultants” fulfill a key role, too, both in working with students and in ensuring that our DWCs don’t drift from being writing consultants to becoming disciplinary advisors.

Today, we bring to you three disciplinary writing consultants and two generalists to discuss different aspects of our work. Unfortunately, two of our consultants are sick, so we will read the paper of one and have blended the other’s presentation into two of the others.

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**Presenter #1: Matt. English PhD student, also obtaining a statistics certification, who has a BS in physics and experience working in the computer industry. Disciplinary writing consultant for the College of Math and Sciences.**

While the specific context of our presentation is writing centers, specifically a center working with graduate students from a variety of disciplines, my thoughts about writing in the disciplines are derived from scholarship on writing studies and my own experiences working as a consultant, and not scholarship about writing centers. In particular, I am thinking of “Ways of Knowing and Doing: Writing in the Disciplines” by Michael Carter from the 2007 CCC in which Carter returns to a frequent idea of disciplines as an activity system: “As a rule, the goal [of writing in a discipline] is not simply to write a research paper for the sake of learning to manage research from sources but to use the process of doing and writing research to shape a disciplinary way of knowing. A greater awareness of the importance of ways of knowing in the fields allows us to take a more perceptive approach to helping faculty create appropriate learning situations for their students.” This idea of knowing (i.e., epistemology) and doing (i.e., techne) and their relationship to the various stakeholders that mutually constitute a discipline helps inform my work as a disciplinary writing consultant.

In addition to the concepts that Carter describes, I have frequently sought ways to incorporate threshold concepts as described in *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies*. From that collection, these are the five threshold concepts identified and elaborated upon in the collection [Slide 4]. For our conversation today, the entries by Chris Anson and Linda Adler are of greatest importance, and given the context, writing centers, I should admit that I read the chapter by Rebecca Nowacek and Bradley Hughes “Threshold Concepts in the Writing Center.”

For my work as a disciplinary consultant, working with graduate students and faculty from departments housed within the College of Science and Math, I want to focus upon how two of these five threshold concepts, writing is a social and rhetorical activity and writing enacts and creates identities and ideologies, has proven useful in my work as a disciplinary writing consultant. Since I depend upon threshold concepts, I want to offer an operating definition that I developed by synthesizing several features Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle identified: a threshold concept offers knowledge that transforms how a person views an activity or understanding of how activities relate to one another that after learning cannot be forgotten easily due to the dramatic shift in a person’s worldview. It is a tedious definition, I know, but I wanted to at least venture some reference point for everyone. The short definition is some concepts are portals (thresholds) that allow a person to pass from one worldview into another—and after passing through the portal...it slams shut.

Returning to the pair of threshold concepts that motivate this current talk, we should consider what Chris Anson writes in regards to these concepts and WAC: “Professionals know tacitly that when they write, they are usually participating in a socially rich activity system designed to convey and negotiate meaning. However, the constant demands for assessment in the educational context often cause them to decontextualize students’ writing [...]. The writing becomes a test of acquired knowledge (as in an essay exam) or writing ability. The interaction involves an expert making evaluative decisions about what a novice has learned” (206-7). I believe Anson has undergraduate students in mind, but the statement applies to graduate students perhaps more appropriately, given the context of graduate studies as an “advanced professionalization.” Having observed a lot of advisor-advisee interaction during my work as a writing consultant, I find many advisors locked into the idea of writing being a “test” of preparedness rather than a component of professional routines—you as graduate student should have learned even more than you appear to have learned, and writing is a matter of syntax and organization. In other words, writing is something readily commodified into a handbook or a worksheet. My guess is that this attitude emerges from advisors forgetting or not knowing about the tacit amount of

disciplinary knowledge that they have acquired through some means (we can consult Polanyi if we wish to pursue that reasoning).

From these and other sources, I shaped my effort to encourage writing in the disciplines at the graduate level. While WAC requires depth of knowledge about writing pedagogy and theory in order to devise the most effective curriculum, WID, as I approach it, involves a shift in focus for instructors (consultants) to assist students in their capacity to recognize the amount of writing that they are doing. A transition from that WID realization enables more meaningful WAC conversations.

In part, this recognition is challenging because, as Carter noted about ways of knowing in a discipline and Anson claimed regarding the tacit knowledge of a discipline, in regards to the threshold concept of writing enacting and creating an identity, students rarely have an opportunity to view their scholarly identity as communicators, let alone as writers—the identity of researcher (a loaded concept) tends to represent designing and performing experiments, then analyzing the collected experimental data because, more often than not, that is what they themselves have defined as doing research. Writing does not enter that defined identity—or minimally.

Interestingly, that researcher or experimenter identity helped me formulate how to approach the graduate students with whom I was working, and I will concentrate on a chemistry doctoral student to illustrate the value of meeting a student in his identity as a researcher.

I was working with a student who was attempting many feats simultaneously—it is graduate school after all. He wanted to complete two articles, prepare for his preliminary exams, and create some professional materials (letters of application, research statements, cover letters, etc.). However, the purpose of our work was supposed to be one document—an article. Already, it was apparent the discipline, chemistry—specifically organic synthesis of iridium III compounds (which we all know about...)—was a complex configuration of genres, audiences, contexts, and much more. He was even reporting confusion about the very social and rhetorical nature of his interactions—though he did not use the word rhetorical, he was acutely aware of the social dimension.

Corresponding with his lab team at NDSU and lab teams at a Florida company and Ohio university were a major barrier for him. He had never really had to conduct this type of information creation (each lab contributing data toward one project, yet each lab having a different focal point—synthesis of a material, testing methodology, and characterization techniques). Writing the article, therefore, was actually troublesome largely because he did not know how to interact with a distributed research team.

Science research is often the joys of collaborating across labs; I know this from my experiences, but this unfortunate student had been thrust into a series of interactions and communications over which he had minimal (probably no) ability to participate. In part, therefore, I started to treat our writing center sessions as opportunities to write and practice collaborative communication. We analyzed several emails from lab members; we explored articles in the field—looking for genre conventions and how to talk about those conventions. Generally, the work was wonderful, and the student slowly formulated his identity and started to recognize in a more explicit manner the social and rhetorical activities occurring within his lab, in his drafts of the article, and among his collaborators. Beautiful, right?

The blemish was we forgot to involve his advisor in a more active manner. And this blemish became a cringeworthy mark after the advisor decided to shift the direction of the project in an abrupt manner—new journal to which the manuscript would be submitted, a different approach to the topic (including more compounds than originally planned), and several more alterations. Now, this is science. This happens, abruptly and often motivated by a single, powerful member of the activity system. It had a strange “test” feel—returning to Anson’s statement. But this is the social context in which the student had to write, and we needed to plot a response. Part of an enacted identity (invoking the threshold

concept) is learning how to apply that identity within a context. Unfortunately, time won as it always has, and the semester drew to its conclusion, but the student reported a greater sense of how to respond and assert him self as a researcher, with emphasis on communicative skills, in particular, writing.

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**Presenter #2: Kristina. Lecturer in English with extensive experience in the K-12 system, both as a teacher and as a leader of projects spanning K-12 and higher education. Disciplinary writing consultant for the College of Human Development and Education.**

My appointment at NDSU is split between undergraduate and graduate writing; I have taught FYW for the English department and worked as a graduate writing consultant for the past five years and a disciplinary graduate writing consultant for the College of Human Development and Education for the past two years. While I do one-on-one writing consulting sessions, workshops, and group sessions with graduate students, much of my work has been developing relationships and then writing initiatives within departments and with individual faculty.

As I was sitting in the “What Works in Interdisciplinary WAC Faculty Development: Results from a Pilot Study” (Elisabeth Miller, Brad Hughes: University of Wisconsin-Madison; Terry Zawacki; George Mason University) roundtable session yesterday, I chuckled along with the other attendees when someone made the observation, and I paraphrase: “I see how working with graduate instructors is impacting the WAC teaching of the future, but what do I do with the faculty that have been there forever!?” This observation followed on the heels of a session right before that one, “Undisciplined Knowledge? Researching Departmental Cultures of Support for Writing and General Education” (Christopher Manion, Jennifer Michaels, Cynthia Lin, Evan Thomas, and Melissa Beers: Ohio State University), where Christopher Manion, likened some faculty members to large, feral turkeys in the forest ready to chase the WAC director up a tree – some faculty just don’t seem to welcome us into their territory. They already have their way of maneuvering through the forest of student writing and that is just how it is.

And while I don’t always work with the feral turkeys per se—it does sometimes feel like I work in a forest. As a disciplinary writing consultant for the past two years, I have worked to develop relationships with individual departments, faculty members, and graduate students so that I can shape my work to their needs, be they disciplinary or general writing support, faculty development, curriculum development, or assessment.

This work includes collaborative sessions with faculty and students, in which the faculty members are kept apprised of student progress by both me and the students, usually via email reports, but sometimes face to face. As we heard from Matt Warner’s paper, the possibility of a breakdown of communication between graduate student and graduate advisor is all too real; as we know, the consequences for the student of such an impasse can be devastating. Fortunately for Matt’s student, the work that they did was solid enough that the student could still move forward. Providing writing support to both advisors and graduate students can frequently ameliorate, sometimes even avoid altogether, the kind of breakdown in communication that can derail student writing progress.

I also develop workshops and interventions specifically for faculty: some examples include: “How to develop rubrics to assess discipline-specific writing,” which can be time-consuming and difficult to grade; “Responding to student writing: How to write helpful comments on drafts;” “Genre-specific pedagogy;” “Writer’s block;” “Scaffolding writing assignments;” and “How to create assignments that develop specific skill sets (like synthesis or citation).” [Slide #3] The workshops usually stimulate very interesting and enlightening cross talk among the faculty that participate.

I was reminded of this again when I heard the presentation, “What Works in Interdisciplinary WAC Faculty Development: Results from a Pilot Study” (Elisabeth Miller, Brad Hughes: University of Wisconsin-Madison; Terry Zawacki; George Mason University); facilitating faculty conversation about writing, and providing vocabulary and the space to encounter and work with threshold concepts, can, just in itself, be highly effective. These faculty are accomplished authors and researchers in their own rights, and it is often very frustrating and confusing to them that they cannot help their students

develop writing professionalism along with research knowledge. Through these workshops, I have seen faculty actively and excitedly interrogate the intersections of their experiences as teachers who teach disciplinary content with their experiences as teachers who understand that writing is a vital *component of the content* they teach. These workshops provide an opportunity to coalesce their practices as teachers who use writing in their pedagogy with their experiences as professionals who think and use writing to learn and know content for themselves.

As Matt paraphrases from: *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies*. Eds. Linda Adler-Kassner & Elizabeth Wardle [Slide #4]:

**“Writing is a *social* and rhetorical activity  
Writing speaks to situations through recognizable forms  
Writing enacts and creates identities and ideologies  
All writers have more to learn  
Writing is a cognitive activity”**

And, as such requires a metacognition element in order to effectively transfer knowledge from one situation to another. I find that these workshops highlight, reinforce, and integrate these four fundamental understandings in many of the dimensions that graduate and faculty writing intersect. Writing is a social activity that intersects across faculty, between faculty and student, faculty and class, faculty and administration, student and consultant, and writers and reviewers. The list can go on and on. It is an activity that creates identities no less for the faculty than for the students. This creation of identity (professional as well as personal) is ongoing and pervasive. Furthermore, it is not just “uni-directional” in a hierarchical direction from faculty or consultant to student. The navigation of graduate writing can become even more confusing than it already is because the recognizable forms for academia often feel to the writers involved as if they have taken on a life of their own.

Another one of the ways I work directly with faculty is graduate student writing assessment, usually for incoming graduate students. I have also had several faculty members reach out to me for help for responding to problematic student writing. In addition, I help faculty with their own professional writing, and point them to strategies and materials that may help them mentor graduate student writing more efficiently and effectively.

Furthermore, I develop workshops for graduate classes and/or cohorts of students. These are usually discipline-specific and use examples pulled from appropriate journals. The faculty member is usually a participant in the workshop along with the students. One example of this is the “Reading as a Writer” workshop.

This is a generalist workshop, based on a prioritization of knowledge across disciplines. One of the basic concepts that are pretty revolutionary to the faculty I work with is the hierarchy of rhetorical priorities [Slide #5]. I begin the workshop with some foundational understanding of **how** we read and write [Slide #6]. I then revise this workshop each time I use it for the specific disciplinary audience.

What I would like to show you today are some materials from this workshop that I developed for a class focused on helping students write their master’s or PhD (but mostly master’s) proposals for the Health, Nutrition, and Exercise Science department at NDSU. One of the faculty members I met when I first went to the departments to introduce myself asked me to help with the class. The class had several years of history in the department, but this was the faculty member’s second time teaching this course. She followed her predecessor’s lead the first time, but was far from satisfied with the results.

We chose two well-written articles from the discipline, one in APA style and one in AMA, and had the students work through some questions about how the information was framed and presented in each research article through online and in-class assignments completed over the course of about seven

weeks and designed to help prepare students to write their own proposal rough drafts through a combination of close reading, analysis, synthesis, and discussion. [Appendix 1 includes the first of these assignments: “Reading as a Writer: Introductions]. After the analysis of the two introduction sections, the students synthesized their findings through writing and in-class discussions. Then, using a rubric with input from their synthesis of their observations of the two articles, the professor, and me, [See Appendix 2—“Rubric for Introductions”], the students began the rough drafts of their proposal introduction. The students used the same rubric for a blind peer review exercise. We repeated the process for the methods section with a handout designed specifically for methods. This past spring we reversed the order, and students analyzed and wrote rough drafts of methods before they analyzed and wrote introductions. Our experience was that doing the methods section first was beneficial.

Like I mentioned before, I have also re-tooled the workshop, “Reading as a Writer,” for students and faculty in the School of Education. The ease, and I would say the effectiveness, of the retooling of the workshop for various disciplines or venues (classroom, workshop, online assignments, etc.), not to mention the original workshop itself, relies on some basic premises that have come out of my work as a generalist consultant. These include those I mentioned earlier [Slides #5 & 6] and the lively conversations we generalists and disciplinary consultants have every week (sometimes every day) about how best to serve the students and faculty who turn to us –often when they are frustrated, overwhelmed, and in the case of students, panicked.

To sum up, I have found that my disciplinary writing work is almost as much with the faculty in the College as it is with individual students.

As you can see from the program guide, our experience as a Center, and my specific experience as a disciplinary consultant, is enhanced and enriched through the interaction of disciplinary and generalist

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**Presenter #3: Drew. PhD student in Electrical and Computer Sciences. Finished his first year as our first disciplinary writing consultant who was referred by disciplinary faculty to us and who had never taught English. Disciplinary writing consultant for the College of Engineering.**

Way back when I had a real job as a practicing engineer, my primary function was to build HMIs—human-machine interfaces—for industrial plants. These interfaces allowed the operators to control the machinery within the plant through touch screen computers, mounted wherever. To do my job successfully, I needed to design these things well, or if not well, then correctly. Most of these operators had, at best, a high school education. So while they were very proficient at their work, they also required a high degree of consistency and intuitiveness within every interface that they used because for every action that they wanted to perform on these interfaces, whether it was to turn a cooling fan on or off or to lockout the machine so that a maintenance crew could do a repair, if the requisite reaction did not occur, we could end up with tens to hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of damage or loss of life. So the idea of audience was really central to all of my projects, and while I was working on the components of the project that would be closest to the operators, the idea of audience was never lost at any point on any of the engineers on the project, because the project itself was born from needs the customer. They supplied us with the design requirements and we filled them. But not one of us would think of or use the word "audience" over the much more concrete word "customer."

Then when I became a graduate student, my audience became my peers, an audience I was now simultaneously a part of—and I must say, an uninformed member of that audience. As I started hanging around these folks at the writing center, my lack of awareness really started to make sense. Because what I discovered is that I had a distinct lack of knowledge about the design requirements of my new job—being a graduate student. The entire concept of writing a research story rather than a research report were alien to me; though I might have been making good rhetorical moves (or bad ones) it was entirely unconscious. I had absolutely no context in which I could apply these ideas and yet I as a grad student I am expected to create knowledge and then to share it, and while I have so many classes and resources available for creating knowledge, the resources available for the sharing part are lacking to say the least.

So as a fledgling grad student I did the next logical thing, which was to look at the literature. It had already been published, therefore whatever these contents were, they must've met muster, so what I saw I emulated. But that was one of the traps I fell into as a graduate student, because at least in my field, it turns out very few others have figured out what writing well and correctly meant, either. Instead what I find is a modern or even sometimes hypermodern way of writing that emphasizes data over conclusions. Data over arguments. Data over speculations. One paper I read examined how several types of antennas caused heating in the head, simulating a cell phone. After reading this paper, I can tell you exactly what the material properties were for the simulated antennas, how long any given wire was in a circuit or how the antennas were oriented to the head. I can tell you which antenna caused the most tissue heating and how much power the antenna consumed to do it. What I can't tell you is much of anything about what the author thought about the results or how they affect the field or discipline.

The funny thing for me is that after I had begun consulting, I later went through this paper and annotated it from top to bottom as part of an effort within our center to document what is and isn't working in different disciplines as guides for students and future consultants. And these notes caused me a fair bit of consternation because obviously as a training tool I wanted to be clear and consistent and form a coherent critique of the paper but I had hard time nailing down exactly how to say what it was about the paper that I thought the author did poorly. There were really obvious things, like metadiscourse littered throughout various sections or the introduction completely neglecting the significance and merit of the issue. But the paper presented its data very well with all the information I

could want about how the antennas caused tissue heating and given that this was something I've seen time and again in the literature I had difficulty deciding on whether or not to say the paper was written badly. The funny part was that two days after I finished writing up my notes, my colleague Phil who is absent today gave me a book called "Writing Like an Engineer" by Dorothy Winsor. I didn't get very far into it but within the first seven pages that I read that day I picked up very quickly on one of Dorothy's premises, which is that engineers like to have data speak for itself. This book, being published in 1996, saw and labeled exactly the phenomenon that I had just struggled with.

And while this pursuit of objectivity leads many engineers astray, and we can see the evidence in the literature, this anecdote also highlights what I as a consultant can provide to a writer. Prior to working at the writing center, in my old role as a peer reviewer, my focus was on looking for that wellness and correctness in a paper, but as a consultant I've learned that these two ideas are really functions of understanding. Can my reader understand my writing? This very simple concept is one I've learned from our generalists and I've stolen many others: writing is a skill, writing is a recursive process, writing is a social activity. Furthermore, just as Dorothy Winsor gave me a name for the criticism I wanted to make on that paper, that simple act of labeling and naming concepts can be of great assistance; where once my clients may have thought of an introduction as a "start, a middle and an end" they are now able to recognize that it needs a setup, a funnel and a challenge and what their readers' expectations are for each.

My background as an engineer also gives me the opportunity to advise clients about the technical details of the writing, essentially extending my consulting role past writing to the technical content as well. I do have to say I don't like to think of it this way because there's a certain amount of weight that the idea of "peer review" carries from the ideas of "wellness" and "correctness" and I'd rather frame the issue under the tenet that clear writing evolves from clear thinking—we can't explain what we can't understand. The second anecdote I would like to torture you with is one of an international student who I met with over the course of a whole semester, who is trying to identify disease in soybean plants using digital images. Essentially they reduce a photo of a soybean plant to a green-scale—like black and white except green and not-green—then measures how green the photo is, all in MATLAB (which is a very glorified calculator with a built-in programming language). In our first session I learned that the disease causes yellowing and that he was using an extremely convoluted method of translating the photos to this green-scale, and this method was causing some degradation of the processed data. I didn't understand this method, so I asked them to explain it and then in order to suss out the merit of this method, I asked why they hadn't used a simple built-in function that MATLAB has for analyzing images. Turns out they had no idea the function existed—they simply had access to this tool, MATLAB, and one of their lab mates suggested using it. Whereas for me this was a little algorithm I learned to use during my undergraduate signals and systems class.

The moral of this story is that any sophomore or junior level electrical engineering student could have helped my client solve the problem. But when I look at graduate writing through the lens that Enrico-as-Matt described, where the knowledgeable, the advisors, the mentors, lack self-recognition of that tacitly acquired disciplinary knowledge and where these self-same individuals present research as a test, it becomes much more plausible that these "solution-producing interactions" occur with a disciplinary writing consultant. And the big advantage of my role as a disciplinary consultant is that given this same story, with the exception that my client meets a generalist consultant, they never get to leave our center with a solution to their technical problem. And no amount of writing is going to fix a flawed methodology.

The flipside to this is that I am not a plant operator. To return that ever-present issue of audience, my services require a continuous re-evaluation of my assumptions—while my understanding of the

engineering writer's content allows me to bring the large palette of tools I've acquired as a consultant to bear, my technical knowledge can interfere with my perspective on the writing because I am a close peer, whereas academic writing must necessarily be able to communicate across the disciplines. Fortunately, I am able to lean on my generalist colleagues not only as a personal resource to engage in that re-evaluation process but also as a resource for my clients, who can always use a non-discipline audience member. And not only that, but we've also seen some clients who have learned to transition between consultants to take advantage of those different perspectives—in one session, they solicit the advice of the disciplinary consultant to ensure the scholarly elements are correct but in the next they will use a generalist to ensure the writing is understandable by a non-disciplinary reader.

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**Presenter #4: Shweta. PhD student in Communication. Came to the U.S. as a graduate student from India. Generalist writing consultant working with graduate students from across the university.**

I am a generalist consultant at the graduate center for writers at North Dakota State University. This position allows me to work with students from a variety of disciplines and provide writing assistance. Students from any discipline can sign-up for writing consultation with me. Through other presentations in this panel we heard from three disciplinary consultants. They work closely with specific disciplines and they have the advantage of discipline-specific knowledge. So, why do we need a generalist? There are two primary reasons why we need a generalist:

*Research should make sense to the outside world*

Often times we hear the view that researchers sit in their ivory towers and publish papers that make sense to a limited number of people within a discipline. Research should make sense outside the disciplines because: a) we need interdisciplinary knowledge, b) to some extent, common people should be able to understand the published work.

In my experience as a writing consultant, I have seen that it is common for pharmacy researchers to draw from research in chemistry, or for communication researchers to draw from research in psychology. However, more often than not, writers have their discipline-specific biases and assumptions that result in compromise of clarity outside their specific discipline. As a generalist, I have a vantage point – I can ask questions that a disciplinary consultant may not. My questions are usually probes to seek clarity. For example, “What are your assumptions here?”, “How much do you think your reader knows about this subject?”

As I ask these questions, the writer and I work to make writing more clear and we all know how important clarity is for writing.

*Student writers come from a variety of backgrounds*

Student writers have a range of proficiency levels not only for English as a language, but for “academic” language, too. As a generalist, I usually begin my sessions with two questions: What are we working on today? What kind of feedback are you looking for? Both these questions have a variety of possible answers. The latter question is more pertinent to this discussion. A lot of times students tell me that they need someone to look at their grammar because either they do not feel confident about their grammar or their adviser thinks that the student should get their writing “fixed”.

I am aware that in the world of writing centers, we do not like to identify ourselves as “fix-it” shops. And I understand that we want to focus on helping student become better writers instead of fixing writing for them. However, if students cannot overcome this stage that requires fixing, they may never be able to become good writers. As a generalist, I help students in identifying patterns of their grammar, stylistic, and other errors. Thereby, I help them to become aware of their tendency to repeat certain mistakes; then, as a next step, they can start making corrections on their own.

When I read students’ work, I draw from my experience of being an international student, and I view writing from different disciplines as English spoken in different parts of the world. English as a language is the same; however, patterns of usage across the globe are very different.

I have an interesting video to share in this regard:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=csYxR-IPMYE>

In this video you will notice that the Spanish woman skips certain verbs and prepositions, the Pakistani man does not use verbs very much, the French man uses limited words, and the Indian woman has trouble with articles. These are patterns that are related to usage of English. Similarly, there are patterns

in academic writing. *ESL Writers: A Guide for Writing Center Tutors* edited by Shanti Bruce and Ben Rafoth, illustrates different stances that can be used to read the writing of ESL writers. I find these stances useful in reading across disciplines as well.

#### *Assimilationist Stance*

An assimilationist basically looks for errors and helps the reader by suggesting corrections. For example, in the video, the Indian woman says “the India” and the teacher corrects her by saying “India, not the India”. This is an example of assimilationist stance. In this video, most of the feedback provided by the teacher illustrates assimilationist stance.

This is helpful when a student is looking for grammar-level changes.

#### *Accommodationist Stance*

“The accommodationist reader’s goal is to help the writer learn new discourse patterns without completely losing the old.”

When a student comes with content that has little room for making changes (I hear words such as, “My adviser wants me to include this”, or “In our discipline we have to say it this way”), I have to work within the boundaries of the discipline. Yet, my goal is to help the student to write clearly.

This stance is also helpful in preserving what Matt calls the writer’s identity. Writers often have a certain way of saying things; for example, I have seen writers who write quite clearly even when they use the passive voice. These are the times when asking them to write each sentence in the standard active voice is not necessary.

#### *Separatist Stance*

This stance is when the consultant suggests new patterns to replace the old. This stance is helpful when a student is looking for feedback on flow, or organization. As a generalist, I can take a step back and view the student’s writing from the viewpoint of a person who does not have any shared knowledge in the discipline. Such situations demand both a subjective view of the student’s writing and an objective view to ensure that the writing makes sense. Changes that I suggest in such situations are mostly about reorganizing the content to make sure that the readers of the content can understand the ideas without making much effort.

Overall, at North Dakota State University the generalist consultants like me complement the work of disciplinary consultants. I feel that the generalists have a special vantage point because of their lack of disciplinary knowledge.

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## Appendix 1: “Reading as a Writer: Introductions”

As you know, one purpose of an introduction is to lay out for the reader the need for the proposed research within the context of current knowledge. This means that the writer must set out the relevancy of the research using a framework of published research that demonstrates both the broader topic and the specific need. Furthermore, the research must be integrated into a logical narrative.

So, how do experienced writers do this? Can analyzing their “rhetorical moves” help novice writers become more adept at integrating sources into their own writing? Let’s see.

First read the Introduction section from the assigned journal articles for content understanding in order to ensure that new content doesn’t distract from concentrating on how the writing works. Then, answer each of the following questions with complete sentences.

### **Topic Sentences: Framing the Introduction—**

Read the Introduction again paying special attention to the *topic sentences*. Now answer the following questions for *each paragraph*.

How does the topic sentence guide reader expectations for the paragraph?

How do the first two or three words of the topic sentence set up reader expectations?

Now read just the topic sentences for each paragraph.

In one sentence, explain *how* the topic sentences move the introduction forward from establishing the topic to the purpose of the research.

In one sentence, explain whether it works and, if it works, why.

Read the paragraphs again.

Using a single color throughout, highlight the moves within the paragraph from broad information to more specific information at the sentence level (as opposed to *within* sentences).

How evenly spaced throughout the paragraphs are the moves spaced?

Are all the paragraphs similar?

### **Reading Citations:**

Now, using a different color than you used for the rhetorical moves, highlight all the citations.

Where is the first citation?

Where is the last?

What do you notice about the frequency of citations?

What do you notice about the clusters of citations?

What do you notice about the distribution of citations?

Now look at the *kinds of information* that are cited.

How do the *kinds* of information relate to the number of citations?

What do you notice about the relationship between the number of citations and:

Where they are in the introduction?

What they are supporting?

Their specificity of information?

What qualifiers (words like “have/has been shown,” “many,” “some,” “suggests,” “numerous,” may be,” etc.) do you find?

Do you see a relationship between the numbers of citations and the kind or level of information?

How are researcher names handled?

Are all researcher names located in parenthetical citations?

What researchers are cited in the sentence versus just in the parenthetical citation?

Why are these researchers cited differently?

***Application to Your Proposal Introduction***

Considering the differences between the lengths of a journal article introduction and that of a proposal, how can you apply your observations about framing topic sentences and citation placement and frequency to the introduction of your proposal?

What are the similarities?

What are the differences?

## Appendix 2: “Introduction Peer Review Response Rubric”

REVIEW CATEGORY	Number the paragraphs. Please refer to specific paragraph number in your comments section.
<b>Organization</b>	<b>Comments</b>
Do the topic sentences lay out a logical outline? If not, please explain where the logic breaks down.	
Check each paragraph for internal consistency. Mark all paragraphs that stray from their topic sentences. If a paragraph does not have a clear topic sentence or does not forecast the paragraph accurately, then indicate to the writer what/where you think the problem is.	
How are the broader, more foundational studies presented? Are any studies out of place or in need of more discussion?	
Please identify the following: Introduction of broad topic Introduction of issue Gap in the knowledge Proposed research	
<b>Citation</b>	
How are the broad claims cited?	
Is it clear <b>who</b> (writer or source) is making the claim or stating a fact? If you cannot tell, underline the questionable claim and explain your confusion.	
Is each source cited either in text, parenthetically, or with a footnote? Note any that are not.	
<b>Relationships between sources:</b> Where are transitions missing? How do the numbers (clusters) of citations reflect the broadness of the claim and their relationship to the research question? What claims seem to require more sources?	
Is the citation system easily recognizable as either AMA or APA? If not, what do you think the problem is?	
Are the citations consistent throughout?	
Do all quote citations include page numbers? Note any that are not.	



Do APA in text and parenthetical citations conform to basic APA citation styles? Note any that do not.	
Do AMA footnotes conform to the basic AMA citation style? Note any that do not.	
Does the review use quotations appropriately? <b>Note any quotes that seem unnecessary.</b> Remember, both AMA and APA discourage the heavy use of quotations.	
Are all in-text, parenthetical, or footnote sources reflected on the References page? Note any that are not.	
<b>Grammar/Punctuation/Sentence Level Organization</b>	
<p>Mark all fragment sentences: they often begin with the following</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">subordinating words: when, as, if, by, because, after, while, before, since, unless, whereas, although, even though</p>	
Mark all run-on sentences, look for two or more complete sentences set apart with commas (the dreaded comma splice).	
<p>Check all commas; mark any that are incorrect (or missing)</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Introductory</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Lists: make sure there is a comma before the final “and” of the list</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Parenthetical / appositive</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Conjunctive: before the common conjunctions: but, so, yet, so, however, and, nor, or,</p>	
Mixed sentence patterns: If you know something is “wrong” with a sentence, but just can’t put your finger on it, it is usually because the sentence doesn’t adhere to one of English’s conventional sentence pattern. You do not need to “fix” the sentence, just note it here for the author to revise.	