Teaching Graduate Students to Write: A seminar for thesis and dissertation writers

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Teaching Graduate Students to Write: a seminar for thesis and dissertation writers

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ABSTRACT Many graduate students face thesis or dissertation writing under-prepared. To help some of them with the task, the author developed a seminar called Social-Science Writing. This article describes that seminar: its organisation, themes, in-class and take-home writing assignments, readings, and student writing workshop. The author also reviews some of the books available to help even novice writers both with their own writing, and to develop the confidence to teach (or request) such a course themselves.

KEYWORDS Teaching writing, dissertation writing.

Introduction
‘When was the last time you had a writing class?’ When I ask that question of graduate students preparing to write theses or dissertations in the USA the most common answer is ‘Freshman Comp.’—meaning that they have not had a writing class since taking introductory composition in their first year as undergraduates, that they have not been trained in the writing of works longer than short essays, and that they have received little or no guidance in thinking through, organising and writing the kind of academic work they are now faced with. In other words, despite the fact that they may have been meticulously prepared for undertaking their research (whether it involved fieldwork, archival work, computer analysis, all three—or whatever else), they are under-prepared in the skills and techniques that will enable them to present their findings effectively, to communicate the insights of their research. No one has taught them how to write.

This article attempts to address that problem by describing a writing seminar I teach for graduate students, and does so in the hopes of encouraging others to develop similar courses. I review some of the literature available—a few of the many books about writing that teachers of such a course have at our disposal. And I explore the details of the seminar I teach: how I organise the class, break a big task down into graspable topics, select readings, use writing exercises and strive to create a supportive writing
learning how to write

Most of the geographers I know are reluctant to consider themselves excellent writers, though some of us truly love to write. For many it seems writing is something that we ‘just do’, hoping it will turn out well. In other words, we treat writing as if it were an innate talent, something we are simply able to do well—or not. Luckily that is not the case, for writing, like carpentry, gymnastics and drawing, is only partially talent-determined. Like the other three, writing is also a skill and a craft. It can be learned and practised, honed and sharpened, practised some more and perhaps even nearly perfected.

To this end, many universities offer courses in writing far beyond introductory composition, often through creative-writing or journalism programmes, rather than in geography or the other (social) sciences. While these courses are not geared specifically to geographers or other dissertation writers, their benefits for geography students can be many. But even if no course is available, numerous books, each with its own strengths and weaknesses, exist to provide assistance to those who but seek them out. And for those who wish to consider teaching a writing seminar for graduate students, these texts can provide much of the necessary guidance, enabling someone who does not consider herself an ‘expert’ to brave teaching the class [1].

As anyone who has survived her own dissertation and gone on to advise graduate students knows, possibly the most daunting part of the task is not the mechanics of the writing, but simply getting started—and then keeping at it. Indeed, as Joan Bolker has commented, staff at Harvard’s Writing Center once joked that “the single most useful piece of equipment for a writer was a bucket of glue. First you spread some on your chair, and then you sit down” (Bolker, 1998, p. 33). Short of that, dissertation writers can find great counsel in Bolker’s (1998) book, Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day: a guide to starting, revising, and finishing your doctoral thesis. Trained as a psychologist to work with blocked writers, Bolker leads readers to understand their struggles and counsels them to overcome these. Her advice transcends the kind of self-flagellation struggling writers often inflict upon themselves to instead build a pattern of positive reinforcement that works to develop individual and constructive working processes as well as create a “writing addiction” (Bolker, 1998, p. 38). With chapters that introduce topics from ‘Choosing an Advisor and a Committee’ to ‘Interruptions from Outside and Inside’ as well as ‘Revising: The Second Draft and Beyond’ and an excellent appendix, ‘Some Advice for Advisors’, her book gently and supportively shepherds her writing readers through what for many can otherwise be an agonising process. With the caring hand of a counsellor, for example, Bolker advises those at the end of the process:

[T]he experience of writing a dissertation will bring with it an important transformation: it will open up the possibility of being a writer, set you well on the road to becoming one, or turn you into one … . [W]riting … [may] have become your ‘practice’, as the Buddhists would put it … the craft you now naturally go to in order to think, feel, and clarify problems of all sorts … . [W]riting your dissertation will … have changed you for all time. (Bolker, 1998, p. 150)

A more distanced if also omniscient tone, in a book with no less sage advice, is achieved
by George Watson (1987) in his Writing a Thesis: a guide to long essays and dissertations. Acknowledging that “a struggle is what authorship necessarily is, especially at the start” (p. 5), Watson counsels apprehensive writers not to worry if they are smart enough, but instead to ask, “Am I stupid enough?” (p. 7). As he advises:

If intelligence means quick-wittedness, then an author can hardly afford to be intelligent. Writing is necessarily a slow and deliberate process. Even the quickest hand or fastest typewriter or word-processor cannot move at the speed of ordinary thought, or even ordinary speech, let alone as fast as the speech or the thought of the quick-thinking mind. To write is not to speed up, then, but to slow down; and an aspiring writer who worries about his own intelligence is only making his problem worse. It is rather like taking a costive for constipation. (Watson, 1987, p. 8)

With a background in English, his chapters include ‘The Lure of Theory’, and ‘The Fear of Eccentricity’, as well as ‘Bad Arguments’, and ‘The Art of Quoting’. Marshalling readers through their writer’s blocs, and mustering evidence from established members of the literary canon, Watson suggests, for example, that:

Many young writers, as Coleridge knew from experience, spend hours in the agonies of self-stupefaction when they ought to be scribbling bad sentences: sentences which, once written, could easily be trimmed, refined and rendered acceptable or something more …. [Coleridge’s] Biographia itself, which burst out of Coleridge during the summer of 1815 … shows what quick drafting can achieve, even if by modern scholarly standards it is woefully wayward in argument and under-revised in style. (Watson, 1987, p. 40)

If Watson’s aggressive style is perhaps intimidating, renowned sociologist Howard S. Becker compels us to laugh at ourselves, even as we struggle. Applying his sociological insights to the process of writing in his book, Writing for Social Scientists: how to start and finish your thesis, book or article (Becker, 1986), he argues that:

… problems of style and diction invariably involve matters of substance. Bad sociological writing … can’t be separated from the theoretical problems of the discipline …. So we need to see … how social organisation creates the classic problems of scholarly writing: style, organisation and the rest. (Becker, 1986, p. xi)

Becker goes on to describe the first day of class in his writing seminar (and an exercise I highly recommend), where he asks each student to describe in detail his or her own personal writing habits. Invariably (and I know this from my own seminar too), the students describe the perfect pen, special paper, a certain sitting position, the right place in a room, a particular time of day (or night), favourite music, the necessity of a clean house—a series of ‘crazy writing habits’, all of which have to be followed before they can write (p. 3). To Becker, this is more than just craziness, for together they amount to a series of ‘magical rituals’ evoked, just as by the Trobriand Islanders described by Malinowski who, despite their extensive knowledge and skill in seafaring, still performed magic over their canoes. In the case of the Trobrianders, the magic helped them against the sudden gales and unknown reefs over which they had no control. In the case of the writers, the green ink and yellow legal pad (or whatever), served the same purpose: the writers who, like the Trobriand sailors, “couldn’t handle the dangers of writing in a rational way, used magical charms, that dispelled anxiety, though without really affecting the result” (p. 4).
Leading students beyond their superstitions, Becker coaches students to understand revision and sloppy first drafts as part of the writing process. Chapters include ‘Persona and Authority’, ‘One Right Way’, ‘Risk’ and ‘Terrorised by the Literature’, until the reader comes to feel not only Becker’s strong presence but also his guidance.

These three authors are not the only ones available; indeed, help for students writing theses and dissertations has been around for quite some time, but most other books about writing theses and dissertations concentrate on the organisation of the work. Ward Reeder, for example, who published his How to Write a Thesis in 1925, includes chapters such as ‘The Working Bibliography’, ‘The Form of Citations and Footnotes’ and ‘The Preparation of Statistical Tables’. William Newsom’s Standards for Thesis Writing (Newson & Walk, 1936) goes still further, even including sections on ink (black) and margins (two inches on the left, one inch elsewhere—due presumably to the need for extra room when binding the pages). George Allen’s book, The Graduate Student’s Guide to Theses and Dissertations: a practical manual for writing and research (1973), begins with an introduction about academic research, moves to issues like committee selection, and includes a helpful outline of the contents of typical dissertation chapters. Gordon Davis and Clyde Parker, who published Writing the Doctoral Dissertation: a systematic approach in 1979, understand that, as students have previously only produced short papers over the course of one quarter or one semester, they are unprepared for the work a dissertation takes, and so many of them delay their own progress, and ultimately also their final results. Designed to keep students on track (and on time) their book, with helpful tables and examples, is geared to ‘dissertation management’ (p. 14) in an effort to make the process of researching, writing and defending a dissertation less intimidating. Lastly, while some of the previous works focused on dissertations written on a scientific model, Maria Piantanida and Noreen Garman’s book, The Qualitative Dissertation: a guide for faculty and students (1999), seeks to help both students and faculty members understand the intricate and non-linear process of qualitative research and writing. Including sections on ‘Precommitment Anxiety’, ‘Slogging and the Fine Art of Task Avoidance’, and two chapters on proposal writing, their book is a helpful guide to anyone anxious about this particular kind of dissertation, particularly if, as is often the case for qualitative researchers, few on the students’ committee have much experience with explicitly qualitative work.

What is clear from the array of books about writing dissertations is not just that ample help is available but, importantly also, that most of these books are focused either on the process of writing the dissertation or the nitty-gritty details of form and layout. None, quite frankly, really teaches graduate students how to write—they spend but little time on the mechanics of sentence construction, the drama of verb choice, the intricacies of argument, the power of pacing.

Most who look for this sort of advice turn to ‘the little book’, William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White’s classic The Elements of Style (1959). Here, as White observes in his introduction, “rules of grammar are phrased as direct orders” (p. v), making them at once easy to follow (and compelling to ignore). Full of good advice, the authors admonish, “Write with nouns and verbs, not with adjectives and adverbs. The adjective hasn’t been built that can pull a weak or inaccurate noun out of a tight place” (p. 57); and, “Make definite assertions. Avoid tame, colorless, hesitating, noncommittal language. Use the word not as a means of denial or in antithesis, never as a means of evasion” (p. 14). The little book is often witty, and at times able to parody its own imperative style, as, for example, style rule number 8, ‘Avoid the use of qualifiers’:
Rather, very, little, pretty—these are the leeches that infest the pond of prose, sucking the blood of words. The constant use of the adjective little (except to indicate size) is particularly depleting; we should all try to do a little better, we should all be very watchful of this rule, for it is a rather important one and we are pretty sure to violate it now and then. (Strunk & White, 1959, p. 59)

But while Strunk and White’s advice is beyond reproach, and their examples of revised phrases helpful, they offer little beyond simple prescriptions—they present few tools and techniques to aid writers in diagnosing the quality of writing, or in leading it through revision. It was precisely with this in mind that Joseph Williams wrote Style: toward clarity and grace (1990) and his textbook version Style: ten lessons in clarity and grace (1997). A teacher of writing at the University of Chicago, Williams does more than offer examples; his goal is to guide readers to polished prose, “to show how a writer quickly and efficiently transforms a rough first draft into a version crafted for the reader” (p. x). Williams teaches his reader writers to understand what the problem is when sentences or paragraphs are labelled ‘unclear’, and then shows, in a series of simple steps, how clarity (in a sentence, in a paragraph, in the work as a whole) can be achieved. Chapters include examples of revised and unrevised sentences and passages, allowing readers to see Williams’ principles in action, and the textbook version provides both individual and group exercises. Advising writers to “name characters in subjects” and “express crucial actions in verbs”, Williams shows how to transform turgid, passive and passive-feeling sentences that “cripple the easy flow of an otherwise energetic style” (pp. 22, 37). His chapters move from simple lessons on diagnosis and sentence revision, ‘Clarity’, ‘Cohesion’ and ‘Emphasis’ to more masterfully complex lessons on the broader flow of fine prose, ‘Coherence’, ‘Length’ and ‘Elegance’, where he aims to inspire his writing readers not just with new skills and an admiration of their craft, but also to write for “the reach of our imagination” (p. 163).

Clearly, what Williams offers is a different kind of guidance. But for those struggling with a thesis or dissertation, both kinds—help with the trials and tribulations of the writing process as well as lessons in the skills of writing itself—are needed. Further, while each of these books has its own strength, none is written by a geographer or for geographers; none presents examples of geographical writing. And while I don’t believe that geographers have developed their own distinctively different writing style, it is helpful (as well as hopeful) to present students with examples of writings by geographers, by scholars who have grappled with some of the same questions that the students will [2]. So a third kind of teaching text can be useful as well: articles or book chapters written by geographers. For this reason, in my seminar, we use all three.

Outline of a Writing Seminar

The seminar I teach, called Social-Science Writing, is geared to graduate students in geography (and anthropology—I am in a joint department). While students from other departments are welcome (and have participated in the past), many of the readings are specifically from geography. Importantly too, it is an advanced course, not a remedial one: it is designed for those who already know the basics, and who are already fluent in English [3].

Each week I divide our three-hour class meeting into three broad sections: first, readings from a book about writing (Bolker, Becker or Williams, for example), ordered in series to help students work both on the process of writing and on its mechanics;
second, readings, either exemplary or flawed, from a book or journal article that elucidate the week’s theme; and third, student writing, submitted the week before, read by the group, and ‘workshopped’ in class (giving students’ works the kind of close reading, discussion and criticism found in creative writing courses) [4]. In addition to the readings, students also have frequent short writing assignments to turn in, as well as a series of in-class writing exercises. The week’s themes, as well as the writing assignments, are designed not only to help students with the writing process and its mechanics, but also to help them break their theses or dissertations down into smaller, more graspable units. In the paragraphs that follow, I describe each part of the seminar, and how the parts fit together into the whole.

If each part of the seminar is important, and chosen for a reason, one of the most important benefits of the seminar comes not from any of the parts alone but from the work done together over the course of the semester: it is the creation of a culture of writing in the class, the formation of a group of students who can talk with each other about their writing, who are able share their work, and help themselves and one another with the writing process. Slippery as a goal, this kind of community begins to form on the very first day when students (as in Becker’s example above) share their phobias and rituals about writing: laughing at themselves and each other, and exposing what they may have felt was a sort of secret or weakness, students begin to bond with one another. Important to the functioning of the entire class, beginning with Becker’s exercise seems to set the group off on the right foot [5].

Of course, this kind of group cohesion is an admirable goal for any seminar, but in a writing seminar it is particularly important: for students to feel comfortable sharing their work, often in draft form, a certain spirit of cooperation and a distinctly supportive environment are essential (Evans, 1994; Hay & Delaney, 1994; Gonzales, 2000). Most students are nervous to share their work: almost invariably, when they introduce the work that other students will read and discuss, they open with a series of disclaimers about why the chapter in question is so rough, about how unfinished it really is, or about how dissatisfied they are with the work. And this fear begins on the first day of the seminar when each student must choose a week to have her or his work read by the group. But dispelling that fear must begin in the first week as well, so I spend time in that first session discussing different forms of criticism. It is imperative that students understand that criticism is both positive and negative, and that, in order for it to be heard and absorbed, starting out from a position of offering constructive feedback and beginning with positive points is tremendously important (see also Gonzales, 2000). Just talking together about how to give as well as how to accept criticism helps students begin to work through what for some may continue to be a challenge for years to come.

Their assignments in this case are to have a thesis or dissertation chapter ready for distribution during the class meeting prior to the date they have chosen, thus giving everyone ample time to closely read (and make written comments on) the chapter in question. Since each student has less reading/editing work to do the week his or her chapter will be discussed, it can be fun to also ask that student to prepare food for the group to share that week (snacks or lunch for example): when the student’s food is teasingly critiqued along with serious engagement with her or his writing, it seems to make the whole experience somewhat less terrifying. The food is generally great, and sharing it (and joking about it) helps the group bond further [6].

Each week then, we spend one hour of class time (almost always the last hour) discussing the work of one student in depth. In a group where everyone is in the same field it is easy to wander off into discussions of the literature or the theoretical and
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empirical nuances of the work presented; the task for the seminar leader (me in this case) is to keep the group focused (at least mostly) on the writing itself: on phrasing, transitions or word choice; on pacing, quotes or authorial voice; on the effectiveness of the opening and the conclusion—or whatever.

But what the one-student-per-week plan does in addition is limit the seminar size to a workable number: a maximum of 14. I prefer to limit it still further: with 13 students in the seminar one week can be set aside for students to read a draft of my own work. Since writing fundamentally involves risk (Becker, 1986), when the instructor shares in the risk with the students it seems more fair. Further, since most of what graduate students read is published work, they seldom get to see the fumbling, unreviewed drafts of others, and it may appear that the writing of the scholars they admire comes easily, and never goes through much revision. To that end, when yet another week is available I ask students to read a manuscript I have submitted for publication, to read and think through the reviewers’ and editor’s comments on the manuscript, and then to read the final and much revised published article. Often this is the first time students have read reviewers’ comments, and the first time also they have seen the transformation an article can undergo before it reaches the public—they can see the room for improvement in my first draft just as they can in their own (see also Hay & Delaney, 1994).

While I don’t tout my own manuscript or published article as exemplary, I do ask the students to read published works by geographers (and others) that draw attention to weekly class themes. For example, when discussing openings (for sentences, paragraphs, chapters or entire works), I assign Cindy Katz and Andrew Kirby’s article, ‘In the nature of things: the environment and everyday life’ (1991). Katz and Kirby open a complex theoretical discussion with an engaging story about Scott and Amundsen’s races to the South Pole—a parable that runs parallel to their theoretical discussion throughout the article, a compelling opening that sets up their entire argument.

For most students, an engagement with theory is complex, highly referenced and difficult (to write and to understand if not also to read). For this reason, when we discuss theory, I assign David Harvey’s ‘Monument and myth’ (1979). Here, Harvey’s gripping story, light-handed writing style and deep theoretical commitments are beautifully intertwined, demonstrating both how profound our theoretical underpinnings are to our work, and the potential power of their expression.

Sometimes the best way to learn is not from a masterful work but rather from one that is flawed. Any academic can probably point to works that she finds egregiously awful, and some well-known debates within geography have centred on authors’ writing styles (see, for example, Symanski, 1976; Limerick, 1993; Price & Lewis, 1993; Henderson, 1998). To avoid name-calling in my own field during the week when our topic is turgid prose and the institutional passive voice, I assign Alan Sokal’s controversial article, ‘Transgressing the boundaries: toward a transformative hermeneutics of quantum gravity’ (1996). Here Sokal disguises blatant nonsense (the claims he makes are purposely completely false) with deliberately convoluted prose—prose that is difficult to decipher both for its feigned engagement with complex theoretical concepts as well as its sheer turgidity and awkwardness of phrasing. Since most students today are unfamiliar with the controversy that erupted after his article was published, assigning the article without advance comment leaves most to take the article at face value and slog through it—and then, in class, to a discussion of academic ethics once they learn that the article is a hoax, as well as heated debate about the place of jargon in academic prose.

Some of the topics we cover are necessarily ‘smaller’ but every bit as important to polished writing. For example, when the subject is pacing and paragraphing, we read
James Fentress’s chapter ‘The Mafia and the myth of Sicilian national identity’ from the book *Social Memory* that he co-authored with Chris Wickham (1992). Most inexperienced academic authors don’t think of their works as having a pace, much less a plot, and they consider paragraphing simply a break between topics, not something consciously crafted by the author. Fentress’s chapter demonstrates both to great effect: Opening with the mythic tale of the origins of the Sicilian *mafia*, Fentress exposes its falsity only after the reader is comfortable with its seeming factuality—and then proceeds to undermine that factuality bit by bit, creating a dramatic tension in the chapter that propels the reader forward. As he does so, the end of each paragraph, like the end of a chapter in a 1930s hard-boiled detective novel, seems to insist that the reader leap to the next one. His paragraphs do not end where ideas or thoughts end, but rather one step later: they set up the transition to the next idea, compelling the reader to continue. Overall, the feeling in this academic prose is one of plottedness—the author has paced and paragraphed his work in such a way that the reader experiences it as a story. By using such simple devices, Fentress’s work is no less scholarly, no less rigorous, and it demonstrates to students how a skilled writer has command of his craft, both in large and in small ways.

One of the most difficult topics to teach, and especially to truly impart, is revision (Hay & Delaney, 1994; Kennedy-Kalafatis & Carleton, 1996). Because many graduate students are still accustomed to the undergraduate model of term-paper writing—composing an entire paper in one night’s concentrated effort—it can be difficult to convey not only the importance of revision, but also its ubiquity among good writers. As part of the process of learning revision, students in my seminar must revise, according to the comments of those in the class, the chapter or paper they submit for us to read. But they can also learn quite dramatically from Brett Miller’s (1997) article ‘Elusive mastery: the drafts of Elizabeth Bishop’s “One Art”’, which examines the many successive drafts of Bishop’s short poem in detail, moving readers through them, demonstrating how each in turn sharpened the poem’s message (and also clarified and even helped resolve the poet’s feelings). By seeing and feeling the impact of the myriad small and large changes that went into the final poem, readers come to view revision as an integral part of the writing process—as formative itself—and certainly as much more than just running a spell checker.

In the seminar, as we work (and write) our way through the semester we address a series of topics designed to unfold in a way to help students navigate their own larger works. These include (in addition to those already mentioned): audience, accessibility and voice; reviewing the literature and defining your own contribution; transitions; stories, anecdotes and details; argument; coherence; length; marshalling evidence; putting yourself in the text; and conclusions. Along with readings that compliment these topics, I use a number of in-class or take-home writing assignments (Table I).

Williams (1997) includes many helpful exercises, any number of which are useful in a seminar setting. Particularly helpful are sentence and paragraph revision exercises that teach students to implement the techniques described. These can be done in class, and students’ differing revisions then discussed. Other writing assignments allow (or force) students to use their own data—the materials they themselves have collected for their own theses or dissertations. I ask them to write a one-paragraph description of their work for one of their grandparents, the idea being that they should explain the essence of their work to an interested audience without using jargon (a valuable experience no matter how essential that vocabulary will be to the finished work) [7]. They must write an opening (of a chapter, for example) as well as a conclusion. They must write an anecdote...
TABLE I. In-class and take-home assignments (in the order they appear).

- Outline of the student’s work (as short as one paragraph, or meticulously detailed, it must encompass the entire work). Due in class at the second meeting (purposely early in the semester, before any real discussion of writing has begun)
- Detailed explanation of the student’s work for a grandparent (an accessible and jargon-free distillation of the essence of the student’s work)
- Nominalisations exercise, in class (see Williams 1996 for examples and revisions)
- Topic strings/paragraph revision exercise, in class (see Williams 1996 for examples and revisions)
- Opening (for a chapter, article, or the whole thesis/dissertation using student’s own data; can be as short as one paragraph or as long as it needs to be)
- Revised outline (with particular emphasis on major restructuring of the work).
- Topic string/paragraph revision exercise, in class (similar to the one above, because past students have me asked for more practice with such exercises. See Williams 1996 for examples and revisions)
- An anecdote relevant to the student’s work, based on his own data
- Variable assignment: Using the student’s own data in a way that is relevant to her work, she must choose one of the following exercises:
  1. write a place description
  2. write a character description
  3. write an excerpt of dialogue from an interview or quoted source
- Conclusion (for a chapter, article, or the whole thesis/dissertation; it can be as short as one paragraph or as long as it needs to be)
- Over the course of the semester each student also submits (to the whole class) a draft chapter or article manuscript. The final assignment is to submit (to the instructor) revisions based on the written and oral comments of all the seminar participants.

That illustrates a point relevant to their own work. And they must write, and later revise, an outline of their work. Together, the readings, exercises and constructive criticism combine to teach writing techniques students can readily implement, to keep students focused on their writing, and to help them understand and enjoy the writing process.

Some Glitches, and Some Rewards

One of the most difficult aspects of teaching the seminar is that, for it to really benefit thesis and dissertation writers, they have to actually be writing their theses or dissertations while the seminar is ongoing. Unfortunately, for most US students, by the time they are ready to write they are also long-since finished with their course work and eager to complete their degrees. Thus, those for whom the seminar is designed may be the very ones reluctant to join it. Put another way, the seminar might struggle if offered like clockwork on a regular basis, but can be marvellously successful when there is a group of engaged and interested graduate students—and those students may actually request it.

Some students, though, may eagerly join the seminar despite the fact that they are not yet ready to write a thesis or dissertation. Professing a sincere interest in learning to
improve their writing, and promising, for example, to submit an article based on a recently completed master’s thesis rather than a dissertation chapter, these students may be sincere in their desires to publish, but if the seminar falls too far before their own sustained dissertation-writing efforts, some of its benefits may be lost. As one of the benefits is the creation of a (cross-disciplinary) community of dissertation writers who turn to each other for support, students not yet a part of that process will be left behind when the others finish, leaving them again without such a community.

That said, although some who propose drafting articles will never submit their work, others will (in my classes so far, for example D’Arcus, 2000; Carter & Byrne, 2000; Carter, forthcoming), and here the rewards for both the student(s) and the instructor speak for themselves. Finally, while some students taking the course will continue to struggle to finish their theses or dissertations, for others, the semester’s writing deadlines enable them to complete and then to revise what may be their first thesis/dissertation chapter—and they can use that momentum to sustain themselves through the rest of the process [8].

For the instructor the course can be as beneficial as it is for the students—understanding and improving writing is an ongoing process, and the attention to detail in reading, writing and editing that the seminar requires helps sharpen the instructor’s skills just as it does those of the students. Thus I can say unequivocally that teaching the seminar has improved my writing. Assessing the outcome of the seminar for the students, however, is more difficult. With necessarily small numbers of students involved, quantitative measures (such as numbers of theses/dissertations completed vs. those still ongoing) are not highly meaningful. Perhaps the best way, then, to evaluate the success of the course is through the comments on student evaluation forms.

I designed the course to begin by addressing the writing process in order to help students get over their fears of writing, get started, and then stick with it—and the course has been effective in this, particularly for those working on theses/dissertations. One student wrote that the course “has made me more excited (and less fearful) about writing—Bravo!” another wrote, “I began to write what was previously only a thought”, a third wrote, “This class was a valuable guide to the stage I’m in with my work—great way to have structure to the process—don’t know how I could’ve gotten as much done without it. It kept me on track”, and a fourth wrote, “Writing has become more of a fun challenge for me instead of something that I put off doing, feeling frustrated or anxious”. The bulk of the course is focused, however, on the mechanics of writing, editing and revising, and here too students responded positively in their comments: one wrote, “it helped me diagnose some of my writing weaknesses”. Another wrote, “This course has helped me to focus on the actual writing—mechanics of putting a paper together—ideas which will enable me to write an engaging thesis. Writing is difficult, the course helps me to know that I am not the only person who needs to work at writing.” A third offered the following: “The course has given me the opportunity to think about things that have been overlooked in my other classes. Writing well is such an important component to success in graduate school and yet we’re given very little opportunity to talk about our writing or the specific difficulties we may have with it. This class has given me the chance to look at many different types of writing and to really consider and question what works, what doesn’t and why. It’s helped me a great deal with my own writing. I’ve been more willing to try new approaches and experiment with different styles, and I think my writing has improved because of this. We’ve had great class discussions about different writing techniques and strategies and I’ve been able to take these ‘tools’ and use them … .”
Finally, a few students have summed up the goals I had for the course in their own descriptions of seminar outcomes. One wrote, “I have been able to look at my work as a whole. [The class] has helped me with perspective, making getting my doctorate/writing my dissertation seem much more do-able. I’ve become more confident about my writing and editing is much more of a fun challenge than a chore. [The course] has provided me with valuable tools I’ll have with me now and for which I’m grateful.” Another commented that the course “gives practice and practical information—makes us do the actual writing on our own work. [The course] made me open up my work and myself to peer critique of writing.” And a third wrote that the course “not only helped me sharpen one chapter, it gave me skills to work on the others … . It [made me think about] how to critically analyze my writing, and how it could be improved.”

Conclusion

In this article I have described the course I teach, Social-Science Writing, in the hopes that others will be interested in teaching similar courses. Many graduate students face theses and dissertations under-prepared for such writing tasks. Though I don’t claim to have taught these students how to write, I do know that the writing seminar I developed has helped a number of students not only to improve their writing skills but also to make writing a positive and productive part of their lives—and most have since finished their theses or dissertations. In the seminar, with readings and exercises that teach techniques designed to turn awkward sentences into clear and engaging ones, that help students understand the nature of the writing process, and that provide examples from geography and other fields of good as well as bad writing for students to critique, students learn to understand the technical as well as sociocultural aspects of the writing process. By sharing their work with their peers, students learn to give constructive criticism, they may begin to overcome the fear of sharing their work with others, and they see the positive influence the comments of others can have on their work. Thus, the seminar can help not only to sharpen skills that become immediately apparent in students’ writing, but also to assist students as they develop the positive writing processes that will sustain them throughout their own careers.

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NOTES

[1] This was certainly the case with me: I first taught a writing seminar as a graduate student newly finished with my own dissertation.

[2] Actually, Colomb (1988, cited in Hay & Delaney 1994) insists that writing styles or rules do vary significantly among disciplines, and that they are not completely transferable. While I broadly agree with him (think of the differences between the humanities and the natural sciences, for example), it seems to me that, rather than developing a discipline-specific writing style, geographers have tended to adopt writing styles similar to the cognate fields with which they identify.

[3] Thus I deliberately exclude students still learning English, but not necessarily all of those for whom (like me) English is a second (or subsequent) language. For those in the first group, most universities provide courses geared specifically to their needs and I recommend them instead to those courses. This is because I believe that including students for whom the basics of written English grammar are still a challenge would dramatically alter the course, leading discussions away from the more advanced points of English writing that this course is designed to address. Those students, on the other hand, who are already adept at English are indeed encouraged to join: like any other course, this one too benefits from the diversity that an international student body helps to bring.

[4] Thus, though I include other elements, the class environment is somewhat similar to that of a peer writing group, where students read, edit and comment on each other’s work (Gere, 1987). Such groups have been clearly demonstrated to improve student writing (see Gere, 1987; Hay & Delaney, 1994; and Kennedy-Kalafatis & Carleton, 1996) and so I consider this an absolutely essential element of the seminar.

[5] Gonzales (2000) recommends beginning the first class with an exercise not directly related to writing, a getting-to-know-each-other exercise that builds trust among group members. Similarly, Evans (1994) insists that both on- and off-task activities work together to build trust. In my class, self-introductions and Becker’s exercise serve this function.

[6] What evolves in the class resembles in some ways the ‘dissertation support groups’ that many advocate (see Bolker, 1998).

[7] The idea is certainly not to perpetuate ageist stereotypes of grandparental thinking. Rather, asking students to write for a specific person they know (and love—and who loves them too) helps students take the time to sincerely engage in the exercise.

[8] Of course, the seminar could be structured around preparing articles for publication—an equally though differently daunting task. I chose to target my seminar to those working on theses or dissertations because the length of these works makes them so different from anything else the students have written, and because so many graduate students struggle to write their theses/dissertations. The skills learned, however, are by no means specific to these longer works, and seminar participants should be able to use them equally well in their other writing endeavours.

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