

Writing Centre Guide for Graduate Student Support

A GUIDE FOR GRADUATE SUPERVISORS, COMMITTEE MEMBERS, AND STUDENTS

Writing is central to graduate success, but it is not a solo journey.

The myth of the writer as working alone in a room with their pen, their typewriter, or currently, their laptop is both remarkably prevalent and markedly false. Writing, especially at the graduate level, is a collaborative, developmental process that involves students, supervisors, and institutional supports, the most important of which is the LA&PS Writing Centre.

This guide is designed to spark reflection on the often-hidden aspects of graduate writing, particularly in relation to the importance of graduate supervision and communication practices in moving that writing along. By highlighting the importance of establishing reciprocal and considerate writing processes – and the role that each member of the process plays – the Writing Centre helps students and supervisors meet their academic and developmental goals.

The Writing Centre's Role

The Writing Centre plays a key role in supporting both students and supervisors. Attuned to the complexities of the iterative nature of graduate level writing, the Writing Centre offers evidence-based expertise to help both students and supervisors work through the graduate writing process more effectively.

For Graduate Students

Graduate level writing means writing for various audiences. The Writing Centre offers individual consultation on course papers or assignments, public-facing work like conference presentations or articles, or long-form writing like theses or dissertations.

Whether you are at the planning or the writing stage, our instructors can help you clarify your ideas, organize your thoughts, and work through your writing process. No one writes alone, and we are here to help! Visit [the Writing Centre website](#) to book an appointment.

For Supervisors, Committee Members, and Graduate Program Directors

Supervising graduate students can be challenging, especially when it comes to supporting dissertation development. The Writing Centre provides strategies for assessing work, providing meaningful feedback, and enhancing academic advancement through [in-class](#) visits, [individual consultations](#) and [faculty workshops](#) to help you help your students.

Challenges in Graduate Student Writing Processes

Graduate student writing is complicated by academic, emotional, situational, and cultural challenges. Graduate supervisory awareness of these aspects can foster improved productivity in the writing, and positive receipt of feedback.

Challenge	For Graduate Students	For Graduate Supervisors
	Graduate writing, whether at the Masters or Doctoral level, is an emotionally taxing process that requires us to think through complex ideas, consult multiple literatures, reconsider our own analysis, and present our ideas in polished forms to a variety of audiences. It is not unusual for graduate writers to feel overwhelmed or frustrated at various points in the	While developing emerging scholars is ultimately a rewarding experience, the process of supervising graduate writers may feel daunting. Even those with considerable experience need to remember that writing at this level is a unique and novel experience, often accompanied by emotions that may undercut a Graduate writer's

	<p>writing process, but it is important to access support when you do.</p> <p>Reach out to your Supervisor, Committee Members, or the Writing Centre for help if you experience any of the following challenges:</p>	<p>confidence. Successful graduate supervision involves clarifying expectations and offering pathways for students to navigate significant challenges.</p> <p>Here are some strategies you can use to assist your students:</p>
Expectations	<p>Perfectionism: setting unrealistic expectations throughout the writing process, thinking you must produce perfect results all the time.</p> <p>Unclear Expectations: feeling unsure about what is required and involved at this level.</p> <p>Time management: finding it difficult to properly divide up your time to complete all the tasks.</p>	<p>Modelling: presenting and discussing “mentor texts” (see FGS Theses and Dissertation Database) can help familiarize students with disciplinary expectations and increase their confidence level.</p> <p>Realistic Outcomes: reminding students of the iterative nature of long-form writing and encouraging a process-oriented approach normalizes the need for multiple revisions, which may seem daunting at times.</p> <p>Regular Check-Ins: inviting students to express their views on the mentoring process can help reduce power imbalances and allow you to adjust your approach to best meet their needs.</p>
Conversations	<p>Fear of feedback: feeling you and your work may be judged harshly, so you avoid sharing ideas rather than face any criticism.</p> <p>Isolation: feeling you are alone with your writing, that it is a solitary process, that reaching out to others is weakness. It’s not!</p>	<p>Reciprocity: creating space for students to work through their ideas by listening to and engaging with their point of view can help them choose their path and help us avoid “over-determining” the direction of their research or argument.</p>

	Feeling Overwhelmed: getting lost in the research, having difficulty finding your voice.	
Development	Imposter syndrome: feeling you do not belong, you do not measure up to the task, everyone but you knows what they are doing.	Professionalization: identifying the possible roles students can assume as members of departmental, faculty, or university committees can help them gain valuable experience and develop their professional profiles.
Support	Remember that the counsellors at FGS Graduate Student Wellness Services are available to support you in your academic journey.	Remember that your colleagues, both in FGS and at the Writing Centre are a great source of collaboration and support in the mentorship process.

The Graduate Supervisor-Graduate Student Writing Relationship: An Interactive Model

Research shows that the establishment of a productive relationship between supervisors and graduate students is essential to the completion of graduate degrees. To create an environment where the graduate students feel free to express themselves and fulfill their own goals, supervisors not only provide guidance, but also consult with the student on how they best receive that guidance. When graduate writers feel empowered to advocate for themselves and their academic and professional goals, they accomplish those goals more frequently, with more confidence and with a more positive attitude about the process. When graduate students take ownership of their research and writing goals with the timely support and encouragement of their supervisors, the power imbalances that inevitably exist can be successfully navigated and productively managed to achieve a more collaborative relationship.

Supporting the Writing Process: Shared Roles and Responsibilities

Writing Support Components	What Graduate Supervisors Can Do	What Graduate Students Can Do
Goal Setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask students what skills they hope to build in achieving their projects. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider and express what you hope to achieve and how to achieve it (i.e., research path, career options, post-doc opportunities).
Expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarify expectations about how the writing process could work – milestones, guidance you will provide, potential resources. • Invite students to express their expectations and concerns about the writing process. • Acknowledge your writing experiences, sharing the difficulties you have faced or face – emphasizing the recursive nature of writing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share with your supervisor how you work best, what type of feedback you find most helpful, and any scheduling constraints you may encounter. • Do not be afraid to express your concerns and worries about the writing process at any stage of the project – to your supervisor, to your peers, at the Writing Centre. • Bring forward the challenges you may be experiencing in working through your drafts so your supervisor can offer guidance or resources.
Conversation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remind students that writing is about an exchange of ideas, and that they do not need to submit writing to have generative research and writing discussions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider your writing as an exchange of ideas. • Enquire whether your supervisor is open to meeting with you to discuss your ideas without the obligation of having written work to present.
Guidance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen for and anticipate areas that student might benefit from research and writing guidance. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determine what knowledge gaps you have about the research and writing process and

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide students with models (mentor texts) that clarify genre expectations. 	<p>check if your supervisor can offer guidance or constructive feedback.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you are unsure of writing expectations, ask supervisors for examples.
Feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask students what framework for receiving comments works best for them. • Offer formative, actionable, timely, constructive feedback, focusing on clarity and content rather than sentence-level grammar. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask for feedback proactively, regularly, and be specific about your concerns. • Consider feedback a conversation, offering you the opportunity to explain, expand, refute, or clarify your ideas with your supervisor. • Acknowledge the moments where you believe your writing is lacking, and how.
Professionalization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage public presentation of their work and proactively suggest avenues and outlets to do so. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Locate opportunities to present your work in public-facing spaces so you can expand your network, grow your research, and share your ideas with peers in your discipline.
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognize when your graduate student requires assistance beyond your capabilities and refer them to helpful resources (see list below). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reach out to your mentor, to the Writing Centre, and to other York University resources for assistance (see list below) when you feel blocked or overwhelmed or in your research and writing process.

Demystifying Academic Writing

Standard [Academic] English is no one's mother tongue.

Peter Elbow

Writing well means entering into a conversation with others. Academic writing in particular calls upon writers not simply to express their own ideas, but to do so as a response to what others have said.

Gerald Graff & Kathy Birkenstein, *They Say, I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing*

Contrary to popular belief, no one finds academic writing easy. For graduate students, understanding the rhetorical and disciplinary expectations of graduate writing in their area of specialization can seem daunting as they move into dissertation and thesis writing. However, supervisors may help by taking a process-based approach that recognizes the iterative nature of thinking, research, and writing, and uses sources as models of disciplinary conventions to help make the writing journey much more enjoyable, engaging, and productive. As you guide your graduate students through the writing process, remind them that as they enter the conversations other scholars have begun before them, they not only gather the information, perspectives, and analysis that will help them develop their own arguments and shape their research paths, they are also encountering models for how to present their work in ways that align with the conventions of the discipline, including the construction of introductions, literature reviews, section headings, citation styles, results formatting, discussions, and conclusions. By drawing attention to writing models, you can support your graduate students in developing both their ideas and the conventions of academic writing needed to communicate them effectively.

Graff & Birkenstein's [They Say, I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing](#) is a rich source of rhetorical strategies and discourse markers that help make graduate students' writing work within an academic context. Early in the writing process,

supervisors can help graduate students build confidence by sharing important suggested phrases and structures commonly used in academic texts. Two templates supervisors may consider are provided below.

A Starter Template to Form Introductions and Identify Key ideas

In recent discussions of _____, a controversial issue has been whether _____. On the one hand, some argue that _____. From this perspective, _____. On the other hand, however, others argue that _____. In the words of _____, one of the view's main proponents, " _____." According to this view, _____. In sum, then, the issue is whether _____ or _____.

My own view is that _____. Though I concede that _____, I still maintain that _____. For example, _____. Although some might object that _____, I would reply that _____. This issue matters/is important because _____.

Outline of the 4-Stage Citation Process

- **Introduce** the source material, capturing the authorial action
 - **X claims, argues, reminds us, emphasizes, reports, suggests,** etc.
- **Restate** the material in your own words to demonstrate your understanding
 - **In other words, X is saying; Basically, X believes; The main point X is making is...**
- **Relate** the material to your own and/or to other authors' position(s)
 - Disagree/Agree/Both
 - **X's findings contrast sharply with those of Y**
 - **X's theory of __ reveals the importance of considering _____**

- While X's view on __ contributes to our understanding of __, their emphasis on __ undermines the idea that ____
 - Reinforce significance - show why this material matters
 - As a result, the way we consider ____ will have important implications for __ in terms of _____
- ** Remember to examine positions that contradict, not just support, your position**

Furthermore, the [Thomas J. Garland Library](#) website contains many of the Graff & Birkenstein templates, and the [Manchester Phrase Bank](#) offers additional phrases and structures common to academic writing such as introducing views, indicating agreement and disagreement with other scholarly perspectives and drawing conclusions.

Finally, remember that your graduate students' writing will go through many revisions, re-thinkings, and rewrites as they develop their thoughts and adjust their perspectives to align with the research they discover, and this can free them from the feeling that their writing needs to be perfect or their ideas fully formed from the moment they begin drafting or ...the moment they begin to write.

Supplementary Writing Resources

- [YUL Citing Your Work & Academic Integrity Guide](#)
- [They Say, I Say Templates](#) (pdf)
- [Academic Phrasebank](#) (University of Manchester)
- [Harvard Writing Centre](#)
- [Proofreading Tips](#)

York University Resources and Contacts

Writing Centre - Located at South 311 Ross

- [Orientation Video](#) – Play this to learn more about the Writing Centre pedagogy and supports.
- [One-to-One Appointments](#): During one-to-one appointments, writing instructors will work with students at any level of university study on any aspect of writing at any stage in the process.
- [Drop-in Sessions](#): Do you have a quick question about your writing? Ask a writing expert through the easy-to-access Zoom links or visit them in Founders College 034. No need to register or make an appointment; just show up or click and go.
- [Demystifying Academic Writing Workshops](#) – Invite us into your department/classroom to demonstrate how to understand assignments, manage the writing process, and develop academic discourse throughout the university experience.
- [PhD Café](#) – The Writing Centre’s graduate writing specialists will help you focus, goal set, project-manage, stick to a timeline, collaborate with committee members, and connect with peers.
- [Asynchronous Resources](#) - Learn more about specific aspects of writing.

ESL Open Learning Centre - Located at Room 327, South Ross Building

- Provides English language support and help with assignments through individual and group sessions plus workshops, theme classes, and our casual ESL cafe.

Modelling, Mentoring, and Writing Resources

- Acker, Sandra and Eve Haque. "[The struggle to make sense of doctoral study.](#)" *Higher Education Research & Development*, vol. 34, issue 2, 2015.
- Caplan, Nigel A. *Grammar Choices for Graduate & Professional Writers*. University of Michigan Press, 2012.

- Cayley, Rachael. *Thriving As a Graduate Writer: Principles, Strategies, and Habits for Effective Academic Writing*. University of Michigan Press, 2023.
- Caley, Rachael. "[Understanding Supervisory Practices](#): Commonalities and Differences in Ways of Working with Doctoral Writers." *Canadian Journal for Studies in Discourse and Writing/Rédactologie*, Volume 30, 2020 Fitzpatrick, Kathleen. *Generous Thinking: A Radical Approach to Saving the University*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019.
- Gerald Graff and Kathy Birkenstein. *They Say, I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing*. 6th ed., W. W. Norton & Company, 2024.
- Madden, Shannon, Michele Eodice, Kirsten T. Edwards, and Alexandria Lockett, editors. *Learning from the Lived Experiences of Graduate Student Writers*. Utah State University Press, 2020.
- Odell, Jenny. *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*. Melville House, 2020.
- O'Regan, Keith. *The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, vol.15, issue 3, 2024.
- [Principles for Graduate Supervision at Ontario's Universities. Ontario Council on Graduate Studies, June 26, 2023](#)
- Swales, John M and Christine B. Feak. *Academic Writing for Graduate Students: Essential Tasks and Skills*. 3rd ed., University of Michigan Press, 2012.
- Sword, Helen. *Stylish Academic Writing*. Harvard University Press, 2012.
- York University FGS [Graduate Supervision Guidelines](#)

Blogs

- "[Doctoral Writing SIG](#)" edited by Claire Aitchison, Cally Guerin, and Susan Carter
- "[Patter](#)" by Pat Thompson
- [Raul Pacheco Vega](#) Blog
- "[Supervising PhDs](#)" by Dr. Kay Guccione
- "[The Thesis Whisperer](#)" by Professor Inger Mewburn