

## **Addressing the “My Students Cannot Write” Dilemma: Investigating Methods for Improving Graduate Student Writing**

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*Abstract: Improved writing can help students in their academic and professional careers, thus this action research project examined the use of three revision strategies in a graduate course by collecting three sources of data. One-sample t-tests revealed no significant differences across paper scores. However, students indicated rough drafts and rewrites were helpful because they were able to make changes to receive a better grade. Students did not find peer reviews helpful. To help students improve their writing, faculty should train them to become effective peer reviewers and give them multiple options for revising their writing.*

*Keywords: scaffolding, peer feedback, revision, rewrite*

The scholarship of teaching and learning calls for faculty to take an active approach to assessing strategies for student learning and development, especially as Angelo and Cross (1993) suggest the best way to improve learning is to improve teaching. As such, it is important to experiment in classrooms with ways to help students reach learning objectives and then assess these strategies (Achen & Lumpkin, 2015).

An important learning objective in many courses is to improve students' writing, analyzing, and critical thinking skills through written assignments. However, students often struggle with writing. In fact, while most universities include writing in their core education for students, recent college composition classes have focused on creativity and content, resulting in a group of students who struggle with structure and grammar, which is detrimental to the reader (Fields & Hatala, 2014). In 2011, the Nation's Report Card indicated just 24% of students in grades 8 and 12 were proficient in writing (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). In an article published in the New York Times in 2017, Dana Goldstein suggested this deficiency in writing skills still exists, citing data from the ACT writing exam in 2016 that revealed high school students lack writing skills.

Employers also are concerned about students' writing abilities. Quible (2008) highlighted that many American employers are unhappy with the writing skills of their employees, and colleges and universities should proactively participate in improving students' writing skills. In fact, employers are complaining they cannot find qualified candidates who can write and speak clearly (Holland, 2013).

Although teaching essential writing skills has traditionally been in the purview of undergraduate composition courses (Fallahi, Wood, Austad, & Fallahi, 2006), instructors should consider helping students improve as writers throughout their education, especially as Bean (2011) suggests writing is an important factor in encouraging critical thinking. By including intensive writing in courses, teachers can help students improve writing skills, which have been declining for years (Carnes, Awang, & Smith, 2015).

Because student-centered learning encourages faculty to design classes and assignments that require students to be active participants in their learning (Lumpkin, Achen, & Dodd, 2015),

and Davis (1993) suggests involving students in the process of learning would help them learn best, students should be active participants in the improvement of their writing skills through revision. Furthermore, Bean (2011) extensively outlines the challenges inherent in writing for students and stresses its importance as a skill to foster critical thinking. He suggests students often struggle to understand the writing process and value of revising their work. He advocates revision is essential for improving writing and recommends teachers encourage revision in the classroom environment.

Mastering and improving writing skills is important for students, not only while they are working toward their degrees, but also when they enter the professional world (Kellogg & Raulerson, 2007; Law & Baer, 2017; Varelas, Wolfe, & Ialongo, 2015). Learning how to write well and improve communication skills becomes even more important in what Brandt (2005) calls the knowledge economy. In the knowledge economy, writing is the focus because creating and selling knowledge generates wealth. In a variety of fields including, law, business, nursing, web designing, journalism, and technology, individuals with writing-intensive positions (more than 30% of their time was spent on writing in a typical work day) reported writing a variety of documents including emails, press releases, web copy, direct mail, marketing plans, letters, proposals, articles, evaluations, policies and procedures, and brochures (Brandt, 2005). Because writing well is important for securing business, documents are often reviewed multiple times prior to release (Brandt, 2005), making it important for students to gain skills in reviewing writing. Brandt suggested the high levels of oversight and collaboration in workplace writing were related to the fact that writers must mediate and synthesize information for presentation to myriad of audiences. It is essential that writing be technically sound and often follow specific guidelines (Brandt, 2005). Although students often lament writing because they do not see its applicability to their future careers, it is an essential component to their professional success.

While writing skills are an essential piece of all graduate programs (Gimbel & Mills, 2013), research on student-centered strategies to help students, and specifically graduate students, is limited. The purpose of this study was to utilize three different revision strategies to improve student writing and assess which of these was most effective in improving the average score on students' papers, since revision is essential to learning to write effectively (Law & Baer, 2017). Additionally, this study sought to understand which strategy was perceived to be most beneficial in making students better writers by gathering student perceptions of the strategies.

## Literature Review

The movement for writing across the curriculum was meant to connect writing to learning within disciplines (Lester et al., 2003). In fact, Monroe (2003) argued disciplines are an integral part of encouraging writing to play a role in undergraduate and graduate education at a university. He suggests, "The most philosophically consistent approach to teaching writing is thus to embed it from the outset as integrally as possible in the work of the disciplines" (p. 5). Instructors in all classes should take an active role in fostering students' writing and critical thinking skills through purposeful written assignments.

The addition of writing into all courses within curriculum is not a new concept, however, faculty and students have been hesitant to embrace it because both groups worry about the extra time and effort writing adds to courses (Boice, 1990). Through observations of classrooms and discussions with faculty, Boice (1990) found faculty voiced concerns of receiving strong disapproval and low ratings from students when they tried implementing intensive writing into

their courses. He encouraged teachers to make writing a more public and social activity by having students share early drafts and discuss their topics and progress with one another.

Along with discussing topics and progress with each other, students should be encouraged to practice writing. Kellogg and Raulerson (2007) argued deliberate practice is essential for improving students' writing skills. This means writing should be incorporated into students' major classes and they should be taught to write consistently over a period of time, instead of writing all at once to meet an assignment deadline. Essential to deliberate practice is timely and useful feedback provided by teachers (Kellogg & Raulerson, 2007). While faculty often avoid assigning papers because of the time it takes to grade, improving student writing is a valuable endeavor because effective writing skills are important during students' education and occupations after college (Kellogg & Raulerson, 2007).

The preceding highlights that faculty should assign writing in discipline specific courses, and encourage students to complete drafts, discuss their work publicly, and practice their writing skills. While many studies focus on improving writing in high school or freshman composition courses, some academic literature also provides suggestions for teaching strategies to improve writing skills for other college students. Fallahi et al. (2006) examined the impact of teaching strategies on undergraduate psychology students' basic writing skills. They used in-class writing lessons, peer editing, writing practices, and extensive, timely feedback as instructional strategies to improve students' writing, and found significant improvements in referencing skills, writing mechanics, grammar, and writing style over time. In another study on strategies for improving college students' writing, Quible (2008) determined writing skills could be improved by using strategies-oriented review materials, which focus on teaching students ways to recognize errors in their writing.

Repetition and revision also have been examined as strategies for improving students' writing skills. Fields and Hatala (2014) studied the impacts of repetition on students' writing skills and found student scores increased from the beginning to the end of the semester on assignments when students were encouraged to complete multiple writing assignments throughout the semester. Additionally, student perceptions indicated that while students did not like the number of assignments, they recognized their writing improved over time. Similarly, Johnstone, Ashbaugh, and Warfield (2002) found students' writing skills improved by using repetition. The writing initiative undertaken by these researchers also included lecturing students on the importance of writing, having students write professional accounting documents in their classes, giving students extensive reference materials, and providing high-quality general and technical feedback to their students. In a community college setting, Varelas et al. (2015) designed writing assignments to improve student skills, while also engaging them with course content. These assignments were described as low-stakes and spread throughout the semester. Using this approach, students' papers improved in clarity, organization, and grammar, which they attributed to utilizing repetition and shorter assignments earlier in the semester.

In terms of revision, Levy and Ransdell (1995) determined that time spent revising, especially after each writing session, had the greatest impact on quality. However, they also pointed out unskilled writers tended to treat revision as merely fixing superficial errors, instead of reviewing content and critical thought. The second approach to improving students' writing skills discussed by Varelas et al. (2015) involved breaking an assignment into multiple parts, including a rough draft, and providing comments and feedback to guide students. Overall, they found providing students with a good explanation of the assignment, a checklist to use when completing

the assignment, completing a discussion in class on their topic, handing in a rough draft, and being given sample papers improved performance on the writing assignment.

While requiring rough drafts can help students become better writers, McDonough (2000) opines students often feel as long as they fix what the instructor commented on there are no other issues in their draft, thus turning in a rough draft might not actually help improve their writing. The main benefit of the submission of a draft is that it forces students to have at least a short time period between an initial draft and the final submission (McDonough, 2000). However, McDonough suggests using peer review instead of teacher review of rough drafts to encourage students to develop critical reading and writing skills.

Peer revision has received particular attention in the literature, though most often in the English as a second language (ESL) or English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom. In this context, Attan and Khalidi (2015) extoll peer revision as an essential part of the writing process, especially as it has benefits for both the writer and reviewer. In their study, they found students easily incorporated feedback when underlining and providing information about words, phrases, or sentences directly on the draft, but struggled to incorporate content written on a peer response form. Also, writers in their study were too dependent on reviewers and only fixed errors that were pointed out by reviewers, neglecting to further examine their entire paper for revision and correction. However, overall peer revision led to improvement between drafts. This was also found to be true in graduate students whose scores improved significantly from first to final drafts (Crossman & Kite, 2012). The in-person review sessions in their study resulted in reviewers asking probing questions that helped writers further develop texts. Peer review can also be effective in an electronic format, as Law and Baer (2017) found that students learned from both giving and receiving feedback through an online peer review system.

Although peer review has been found to be effective in improving students' writing scores, comparisons between peer feedback and teacher feedback have resulted in mixed findings as to which type of feedback is more effective in improving writing quality. Tai, Lin, and Yang (2015) explored whether peer review with teacher feedback or teacher feedback were more effective in the context of the college ESL classroom. Students who received peer review with teacher feedback performed better than the students who did not in their study. However, students preferred teacher feedback to peer review feedback because they felt teacher feedback improved the quality of their writing. Conversely, Eksi (2012) found no significant differences in performance when undergraduate students in the EFL classroom received teacher feedback versus peer feedback. This could be because students in this study overall felt feedback from peer reviewers was helpful. Additionally, Covill (2010) determined there were no significant differences in final draft quality between students whose papers went through formal peer review and students who were instructed to revise and review their own papers. Students also did not find the formal review process very helpful for improving their writing, while those without formal review had more positive views of the writing requirement.

Strijbos, Narciss, and Dunnebie (2010) conducted an experimental study of the impacts of type of feedback and competence of the reviewer on revisions with graduate students. Results suggested elaborate feedback when the reviewer was judged to be highly competent might stunt students' ability to actively participate in the revision process, causing them to rely solely on this feedback to make changes. Interestingly, peers judged to be less competent did not provide feedback that was perceived to be less adequate for the writer. In a study of perceptions of peer reviewers, Tai et al. (2015) found students enjoy peer review and believe they can learn from their

peers. However, students also were concerned about the quality of peer reviewers' opinions and felt they provided mostly superficial feedback.

Allowing students to rewrite an assignment after it has been graded and commented on by an instructor is another option for encouraging writing skill improvement through revision. Gimbel and Mills (2013) discovered graduate students were most likely to choose to rewrite an assignment to improve their grades. According to students in the study, receiving feedback from the instructor indicated the instructor cared about them, and gave them a clearer idea of expectations. The process of rewriting the assignment allowed students to gain insight, signaling that the rewrite process can be valuable.

Few studies have examined multiple strategies for improving writing through revision. In comparing Iranian EFL learners using a checklist, peer review, or teacher feedback, Rashtchi and Ghandi (2011) uncovered that giving students a checklist to follow as a guide could positively impact writing. This is partially because it forces learners to critically evaluate their writing, decide the best course of action, and make decisions on how to improve their writing. Writing ability is improved through this self-assessment, which was more effective in this study than receiving comments from the teacher. There were no significant differences between the writings of groups who had peer feedback from those who had teacher feedback. In general, however, results of their study supported positive impacts of revision on writing quality.

The preceding studies highlight that encouraging improvement over time and completing revisions are essential to improving writing. Evaluating ways to help students improve their writing is important from an academic and professional perspective; however, research into improving graduate student writing skills is limited. Writing in courses helps students synthesize and communicate ideas, and learning to do so effectively happens with practice and repetition. In a competitive job market, it would be beneficial for students to improve their writing skills to meet the demands of those hiring them. This project was undertaken after teaching two graduate courses in which students struggled to write, and voiced significant displeasure at the idea of writing. As a teacher engaged in the scholarship of teaching and learning, I designed an action research project to determine how to best help students improve their writing skills through revision, and thus improve their grades on written assignments. This action research project endeavors to answer the following research questions:

1. Which revision strategy leads to the greatest improvement in student scores on written assignments?
2. Which revision strategy do students find most valuable for improving their writing and why?
3. Which revision strategy do students find least valuable for improving their writing and why?
4. Do students value improving their writing skills? Why or why not?

## **Method**

This action research project used a set of four nearly identical assignments during the course of a semester to assess the effects of three revision techniques in a graduate class at a four-year, public university in the Midwest. Action research is a type of research in which teachers examine their own teaching practices, analyze the results of their inquiries, and learn how to make positive changes to their own teaching (Crothers, 2015). Typically, these studies are undertaken within the teacher's classroom and are context specific (Crothers, 2015; Efron & Ravid, 2013). This systematic investigation of teaching methods allows teachers to learn what does and does not work in the classroom and provide support for the pedagogical decisions they make (Crothers, 2015).

According to Mills (2000), there are four stages in action research, which include deciding on an area of focus, collecting data, evaluating and interpreting data, and making a plan of action.

In this study, three types of data were collected to provide a multi-faceted view of the revision strategies tested in the course. A departmental colleague invited graduate students who were enrolled in a graduate sport marketing course to participate and administered informed consent forms. The departmental colleague kept the informed consent forms until final semester grades were submitted. Of the 19 students enrolled in the course, 18 agreed to participate in the study. All students were first-year graduate students in their second semester. The course was required for all students in the sport management concentration and offered as an elective for students in other concentrations in the departments' graduate program.

In the course, students completed four papers, which were graded on the same rubric. The assignment description for each paper was the same; only the topics varied for each paper. Three different writing interventions (rewrite, rough draft, and peer review) designed to help students become better writers by revising their work were implemented. After completing the first paper, students were given the opportunity to rewrite their paper and resubmit it in five days using the feedback given by the instructor (rewrite). Prior to submitting the second paper, students were invited to send the instructor a draft five days before the due date. Then, they were given feedback and allowed to make revisions prior to turning the paper in (rough draft). Students brought the third paper to class and received feedback from their peers on the draft (peer review). Finally, students were not given an opportunity to revise the fourth paper. The main difference between the rewrite and rough draft was the timing of the revision. In the former, students had received a grade prior to revising their work; in the latter, they were given detailed feedback as to how to improve their paper. This distinction was important as students may perceive the revision and feedback differently depending on whether it was graded or not. Additionally, grades could be impacted based on the amount of work that was completed prior to instructor feedback. For example, sometimes when rough drafts are required, students do not make significant progress for feedback to be given. However, if a rewrite is offered after papers are graded, students will have completed a whole paper prior to getting feedback.

The first source of data collected was grades earned on the papers. After final course grades were submitted, consent forms were viewed and eighteen students' grades were downloaded and identifiers were removed for analysis. The mean, median, and mode scores for each assignment were calculated and t-tests were used to determine if there were significant differences in students' grades on papers. Differences in median and mode were reported to further illustrate the impact of the strategies on students' grades.

The second source of data was an anonymous survey of students' perceptions of revision strategies. During finals week, students were sent an anonymous survey link via Survey Monkey and asked to respond to the survey if they had agreed to participate in the study earlier in the semester. Students were asked one question on a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = not at all helpful; 5 = extremely helpful) about the helpfulness for writing strategies improving their writing. Students were then asked six additional open-ended questions about their experiences using the three revision strategies. Sixteen students responded to the survey. Student responses to open-ended questions were analyzed to identify themes using open coding. The final source of data was the teacher's reflection on utilizing these revision strategies in the course.

## Results

Descriptive statistics for paper grades are reported in Table 1. Papers were worth up to 50 points each. Mean scores indicated students performed best on the rewrite paper, however there was little variation in scores across all four papers.

**Table 1. Mean, standard deviation, median, and mode on writing assignment conditions**

Condition	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>Mode</i>
Rewrite	42.33	4.47	42.5	46
Rough draft	41.00	4.28	40.5	47
Peer review	40.28	3.80	40	40
None	40.28	5.59	39	39

One-sample t-tests were completed on each pairing of means. Table 2 reports the results of tests and median and mode differences. No significant differences between mean scores were found.

**Table 2. Differences in mean, median, and mode between writing assignment conditions**

Comparison	<i>M</i> difference	<i>p</i>	<i>Mdn</i> difference	<i>Mode</i> difference
Rewrite vs. rough draft	1.33	.37	2.00	-1.0
Rewrite vs. peer review	2.05	.15	2.5	6.0
Rewrite vs. none	2.05	.23	3.5	7.0
Rough draft vs. peer review	0.72	.60	0.5	7.0
Rough draft vs. none	0.72	.72	1.5	8.0
Peer review vs. none	0.00	1.00	1.0	1.0

On the survey, students were asked to rate how helpful each revision technique was on a scale of 1 (not at all helpful) to 5 (extremely helpful). Students found the rewrite and rough draft to be helpful overall (3.94), but did not find the peer review to be helpful (1.75). Students also were asked which method they believed improved their writing most. Survey results indicated students found the rough drafts (9) and rewrites (6) to be the most helpful revision strategies. Rough drafts were helpful because students were able to get feedback from the teacher who was grading their paper. One student commented, "Rough draft simply because we were able to get feedback directly from the instructor." Students valued the rewrite because they could change exactly what would help them achieve a better grade. For example, one student commented, "Rewrite because it gives specific corrections to make." The major theme emanating from student responses was that they valued whatever strategy allowed them to get a better grade by knowing exactly what the instructor was looking for when grading. Student comments included variations of this idea. For example, students wrote, "You are able to turn in a paper and get accurate feedback from the source that is going to grade it," "I can see the teacher's feedback. That is who I am

writing the paper for, not my peers,” and “It gave me an opportunity to get feedback from the professor who is the one who ultimately gives the grade to meet what they’re expecting.”

Often, graduate students have many demands on their time because they are working full-time or as graduate assistants. Because of this, students were asked which method was the easiest for them to complete. Six students indicated the rewrite was easiest because it allowed them to make limited changes to specific pieces. Students stated, “I found this easiest because the paper is already done and you are able to keep what is good and change what needs work,” “Rewrite because it gives specific corrections to make,” and, “Rewrite because the entire paper is already written.” Five students indicated the peer evaluation was easiest because, “it took the least amount of time,” and “there was time allotted in class.” Finally, four students indicated rough drafts were easiest because papers can be turned in at various stages of completion. For example, one student said, “It does not have to have any specific form or organization.”

When asked which method provided the most useful feedback, nine students indicated the rough draft method. Students explained, “...we were able to get feedback directly from the instructor, who ultimately is the one who’s (sic) opinion of the material matters most”, “Feedback provides more capabilities since paper wasn’t done anyway,” and, “Rough drafts provide the most useful feedback because changes can be made before getting a grade.” Six students stated the rewrite provided the most useful feedback because, “...you know exactly how you did. From there you can make the appropriate changes,” “I can then go back and fix what needs to be fixed. I can also fix my lowest grade allowing me to boost my grade significantly,” and “...it was feedback on a final draft.” Once again, the overall theme of student comments was related to receiving feedback from the teacher who ultimately grades the paper. Students were very focused on whatever strategy led to the greatest improvement in their grades.

The final question related to the three revision strategies asked students which method was least helpful. Overwhelmingly, students (15) indicated peer review was not useful. Three overarching reasons for this were found in student comments. First, peers ultimately were not grading the paper, so their feedback did not help students achieve higher grades. Students stated, “...peers don’t know what the expectation from the professor are,” “...it was the information that my peer thought I needed not what the professor wanted,” and, “...what the peer sees as good or bad could be completely different from the professor.” Second, students indicated peers were not equipped to give useful feedback stating, “...most of the errors in the papers we wrote, our peers make the same mistakes,” “It’s hard for peers to evaluate content when they aren’t sure themselves what they are looking for,” and, “It all boils down to whether or not the peer reviewer is a good writer.” Finally, students mentioned their peers put little effort or thinking into peer reviews. For example, students commented, “People are too nice. If taken seriously it would be extremely helpful,” “It all boils down to whether or not the peer reviewer...is honest and upfront about feedback,” “Students don’t put the appropriate time or effort into another individuals (sic) paper,” and, “When looking over a friends’ paper, a student is more likely to just say ‘Ya, everything looks good’ and just go back to chatting about other things.”

Students were asked two general questions regarding improving their writing. One of these questions asked students what other strategies might help them improve their writing. Students’ comments revealed three specific strategies they believed would help their writing. They suggested writing more would help them improve. One student even suggested having smaller writing activities in class to help them practice. Also, students indicated clearer instructions and more feedback on graded papers would help them develop. Finally, students indicated having sample papers to read prior to turning in their own work would be useful.



The last question asked students whether they valued improving their writing skills, and if so, why. Fourteen of the sixteen students who responded to the survey indicated they did value improving their writing skills. For many students, it was important for their professional careers as indicated by their statements. Students commented, "Writing is a very valuable asset to have as a professional," "...we can only get better and it will help us throughout our careers," "In any job you will need some sort of writing. If your writing is bad it can make you look bad and unprofessional," and, "Many employers view my generation "bad writers"...I hope I can continue to improve my writing skills because it will be a valued asset when entering the workforce." Students who did not necessarily value improving their writing skills indicated this was because they did not value this type of writing stating, "As for writing specific papers, those days are numbered," and, "I believe I already possess the necessary skills to write professionally for the career path I have chosen." Even students who did value improving their writing skills mentioned they would value improving "... the practical ones I use everyday in my job."

The final source of data in this study was my reflection on the three revision strategies used in the course. First, all three strategies resulted in students being more engaged in their writing process, however, it was evident many students were not interested in improving their writing, at least not in the way I had designed. For example, many students did not take the opportunity to rewrite their papers or provide a rough draft. Still, their frustrations with their grades were obvious when papers were handed back. Additionally, their comments on final course evaluations indicated they felt it was not possible to do well on written assignments in the class. From my standpoint, it seems that they wanted to do better, but not all students were willing to put in extra time or effort to improve their grades. However, the students who did rewrite their papers came to my office for individual help understanding the feedback on their papers. More students sent in rough drafts than chose to complete a rewrite, but most were outlines or very early on in the writing process. This made it difficult to provide useful feedback as the rough draft had little structure or content to begin with.

I gave little guidance for the peer review, which was part of the project design, and so it was not surprising students were frustrated and did not value peer feedback. I chose not to provide instruction on peer review prior to students conducting reviews to avoid testing the effectiveness of the peer review instruction as opposed to the effectiveness of the feedback itself. As I walked around during the in-class peer review, I did see students writing on each other's papers and discussing what they liked and disliked. However, many of their comments on papers were grammatical and revolved around liking the paper, as opposed to a critical review of whether the paper contained the assigned elements and had an analytical component to it.

Overall, students seemed very frustrated writing papers in general, but their writing did improve for those that took advantage of the revision opportunities. For some students who did the rewrites and rough drafts, I noticed fewer mistakes in their peer review and fourth paper. Finally, a few students specifically sought me out to tell me how much their writing improved during the semester, even if they did not enjoy it.

## **Discussion**

The goal of this project was to ascertain what revision strategy would be most helpful for improving student writing, and gather student perceptions of revision strategies. During one graduate course, I tested three different methods for improving student writing to determine which strategy works best and is valued most by students. This is especially important because writing is

not only a skill that is necessary for future employment, but it helps students think about, apply, and retain information, making it an essential part of the learning process. While t-tests did not reveal significant differences in grades on papers across the revision strategies, a review of the median and mode scores does indicate that revision strategies do improve the most common grades and the number of students receiving higher grades. Past studies have not compared these three revision strategies together, although researchers have examined differences between peer and teacher feedback. However, there is great disagreement in the literature about how to effectively provide feedback on writing, including whether peers or teachers are the best option (Tai et al., 2015). This study supports the findings of Covill (2010) and Eksi (2012) that there are no differences in grades between different revision strategies. In the context of this literature, the results of this study further exemplify the answer to the best revision strategy may be that there is not one. Potentially, it is more important for teachers to focus on teaching how to give proper feedback and what to do with that feedback, than it is to determine the best type of revision. Feltham and Sharen (2015) recommend participating in workshops, discussions, and activities related to writing and revision to improve quality of writing and help students to provide peers with a more thorough analysis when giving peer feedback.

This study also provided an initial exploration of students' attitudes toward the writing process and revisions strategies, which is important because the literature has suggested writing is imperative for academic and professional success. Students' responses to the survey indicate they do value improving their writing, especially because they see it as important for their professional careers. Students seem to recognize that good communication skills are in demand, which makes it important for faculty to embrace writing across the curriculum. Fallahi et al. (2006) stress that even though focusing on improving student writing might take additional time from faculty member's already busy schedules, writing is essential for effective communication in students' future jobs.

Similar to the findings of Fields and Hatala (2014), students thought increasing their writing skills was important, but some students still did not spend the time necessary to actually enhance their writing. This is a frustrating barrier for faculty and it seems understandable why many faculty do not assign writing in their courses. One solution to this issue is to help students see the value in learning technical writing skills and proper structure and grammar. In the knowledge economy described by Brandt (2005), writing is a valued skill. Having students read responses provided by professionals could help them understand the value of academic writing to their professional development. For example, students often see little value in learning or adhering to APA citation style, stating that it is not writing they will do in their careers. However, respondents in Brandt's study indicated their writing was often regulated, and they had to learn and follow specific composition and technical rules. While the actual APA citation style may be of little value to students, learning how to interpret and understand regulations and technical writing style is valuable to their professional careers. Explicitly drawing this connection by having students read this article and then research writing standards in their future jobs may help them see the value in academic writing.

Time and time again, students stated they were not good writers and hated writing, which likely impacted their use of revision strategies. This barrier is likely the first faculty need to face head on. As Boice (1990) suggests, teachers can help ease students' fears about writing by having them read and report on articles about inhibitions to writing. This helps students realize they are not alone in feeling like writing is time-intensive and useless (Boice, 1990). Teachers should consider spending some time in the first few weeks of classes having students read about writing

as a process to improve thinking. As they read and understand that many students feel as they do, they may start to alter their thought process and realize they are not bad writers, but instead they just need more practice. Modeling the process by keeping drafts of your own writing and showing these to students can help illustrate what the process looks like, and demonstrate that you “practice what you preach” (Feltham & Sharen, 2015).

Additionally, Boice (1990) advocates for starting with free writing to help students see how this practice can help brainstorm and clarify thoughts and ideas. The first day of class might be a good time to address where students are at in their current writing abilities. In addition, a free write on the first day of class can try to change their view of writing merely as reporting and start to see writing as an opportunity to create and clarify ideas.

Results from the student survey and my own reflection overwhelming point to the fact that peer review is lacking as a revision strategy. It appears this is because students do not value the experience or feel qualified to provide adequate constructive and useful feedback, which are similar concerns to the ones expressed by students in Tai et al.’s (2015) study. But just because students do not find this strategy valuable, does not mean faculty should abandon it, especially since peer review offers many benefits for students if done well. For example, Boice (1990) states if students become effective peer reviewers, writing overall will become more public and audience-oriented, and thus improved. An important part of this, according to Boice, is helping students learn how to deal with criticism.

Additionally, Tai et al. (2015) and Baker (2016) supported the need to teach students to become effective peer reviewers. Evaluating the quality of feedback when requiring peer reviews is an important step for encouraging student reviewers to provide formative, meaning-level suggestions (Baker, 2016). I suggest faculty train students to become good peer reviewers and create buy-in by reminding students they will be expected to provide evaluations of others in their future careers. Even if students do not become supervisors immediately, it is common for employees to be asked to provide evaluations of their supervisors. Learning how to take this seriously is important. Students can be taught to be effective peer reviewers by reading peer book reviews, being given guidance to complete their reviews (such as specific questions to answer about their peer’s work), and having the instructor provide feedback on their peer reviews. This benefits not only the student whose work is being reviewed, but also the student providing the review. In-person review sessions, as Crossman and Kite (2012) advocate for, may be more beneficial for helping students learn how to phrase and discuss their feedback, focusing on content-related comments instead of grammatical changes, or simply writing “good” on drafts.

Potentially, a variety of strategies to improve student writing is more important than determining which strategy works the best. Students have different strengths and allowing them to capitalize on those strengths can benefit them individually. In the future, students could be allowed to choose either rough drafts or revisions for papers. This could be combined with peer review to help students learn from multiple sources of feedback. The combination of peer and teacher feedback could be more effective than either on its own (Tai et al., 2015).

An additional unsolicited finding of this study deserves attention: the disconcerting trend of students’ near obsession with their grades. Most often, students stated the strategy that helped them most was the one that allowed them to write “what the instructor wanted” to get the best grade. As difficult as it may be to concede, the responsibility for changing students’ focus from grades to learning lies with the instructor. When examining the writing across their university, Lester et al. (2003) noted the teacher was overwhelmingly the audience in students’ writing and suggested students have learned to place teachers’ knowledge above all other knowledge and to

value teachers' evaluations of their writing above any other form of evaluation. They suggested teachers encourage students to write for other audiences explicitly to open up opportunities for students to show their knowledge and creativity in their writing. Additionally, to combat this, I suggest explicitly framing the reasons for assignments and avoiding comments on papers that lead students to believe there is only one way to get an A, which involves writing exactly what the instructor wants. Another way to contend this is to show them two very different papers that received similar high grades from the instructor, and then ask them to describe why they believe these papers were graded highly. Finally, students could benefit from hearing employers discuss whether or not grades impact their hiring decisions. If the focus could shift from grades to critical thinking and learning, students would benefit more and teachers would feel less like gatekeepers of knowledge. Additionally, the aforementioned suggestion of helping students see the value in writing in their future careers, and teaching them to be effective self and peer reviewers may help alleviate the sole focus on their grades.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The main limitation of this study is sample size, since this project focused on one class at one university. However, the initial insights of this study provide suggestions for teachers struggling to improve their students' writing skills. Future research should compare students from a wide range of classes at multiple universities. For example, instructors teaching courses with multiple writing assignments could try each strategy in their course to increase the size of the sample. Also, students were not required to complete a rewrite or turn in a rough draft, so not every student in the class did so. While this was purposeful in this study, additional research should require all students to participate in each revision method and compare scores again. Additionally, other methods of writing improvement should be considered, such as strategy-based interventions.

Another avenue for future research is student attitudes toward revision, and how these attitudes impact their approach to, and success in, revising. This should include how a grade impacts their motivation to revise. A more detailed examination of students' opinions and attitudes could help uncover the underlying reasons behind their apprehension. Focus groups, where students can interact with one another and feed off each other's comments, may be an effective method for developing a deeper understanding of this topic. Additionally, researchers should explore different ways of teaching revision to determine how best to help students improve their incorporation of feedback. Finally, future research should examine the best way to structure peer review, so that it is valuable and impactful for students both as writers and reviewers. This exploration would seemingly fit with the concept of engaging students actively with their learning, which Bean (2011) advocates for.

### **Conclusion**

The final step of action research suggested by Mills (2000) is for the instructor to create a plan of action. Based on the comparison results, student comments, and my own experience with revision strategies, I plan to make a few changes in all my courses. Since there were no significant differences in the revision strategies, and there are benefits for writers and reviewers when using peer review, I intend to focus revision in my classes on peer review. This means that I will focus on teaching and improving the peer review process. First of all, I plan to train students to become effective peer reviewers early in the semester. I will start by having them read book reviews both

online and in scholarly journals. Then, I will utilize pieces of my own work for them to practice providing feedback on. To help them focus on meaning-related feedback, I will create a peer review template for them to fill out. I also will have them turn in their peer feedback to me for review, provide comments on, and grade, which will encourage them to value their role as a reviewer and provide detailed and content-related feedback.

Since students do not see clear value in improving their writing skills, I plan to explicitly help students understand the importance of writing and technical writing skills in their future professions by having them read literature related to the topic and bringing in guest speakers to discuss professional writing. Also, I plan to structure the major assignment in the course, a marketing plan, so that it is required to be written toward the intended audience allowing them to practice applying their writing skills to their future careers. Finally, the next time I teach the sport marketing course, I plan to extend this research by examining whether teaching students to become better peer reviewers impacts the effectiveness of and attitudes toward peer review.

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