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A Resource Guide for Consulting with Graduate Students

Mitch Hobza
Purdue University, mhobza@purdue.edu

Vicki R. Kennell
Purdue University, vkennell@purdue.edu

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A Resource Guide for Consulting with Graduate Students

An Overview of Graduate Writers

This document is designed to be a brief resource guide that you can refer to in the future for strategies and general advice for working with graduate writers. Just like you and your peers, graduate writers study and conduct research in a number of different disciplines. They communicate their research in writing that can sometimes seem quite dense. Reading dense academic writing can be a challenge, especially if it isn't from your field or discipline. Since each field or discipline approaches research differently, you may not be familiar with a field's methods (the tools they use to conduct research) or with how this research is presented. Never fear. You have many resources at the Writing Lab that can help you assist *all writers*. As you gain experience with reading and responding to graduate writing, you will draw from your experience with undergraduate writers and continue developing a set of skills that will aid you in responding constructively.

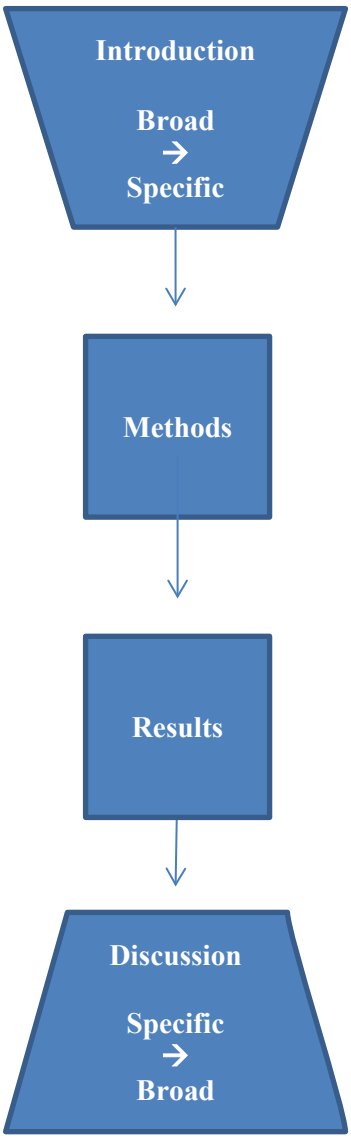
There are just as many similarities between graduate writing and undergraduate writing as there are differences. Although graduate writing may appear to be "more advanced" than undergraduate writing, that does not mean it should be completely inaccessible or incomprehensible to you as a reader. In fact, if it is either of those things, that indicates the presence of something that needs to be addressed in the writing. With the right tools and practice, you will be able to confidently respond to most graduate writers' needs. Figure 1 lists some of the similarities and differences you might find. As you read them, think about how you could adjust your tutoring strategies accordingly.

Similarities:	**Differences:**
○ Organizational devices should help keep readers on track (e.g., clear topic sentences, consistent use of key words, transitions). ○ Authors of academic sources should always be referred to by last name, and all sources should be cited. ○ Sentences should be structurally sound, logically organized, and have a clear subject, verb, and object. ○ Writers should aim to be concise. ○ Old information should precede new information. ○ Paragraphs should focus on a single topic. ○ The main purpose of the document should be articulated clearly and be supported by the writer's discussion.	○ Vocabulary and disciplinary jargon may be more complex. ○ The format of documents may vary among genres and disciplines (e.g., varied use of section headers, footnotes, bibliographies, etc.). ○ The audience may be more specialized, typically members of the writer's field. ○ The stakes for the writing may be higher (e.g., for publication or attaining funding). ○ There may be a number of different genres, such as abstracts, dissertation chapters, seminar papers, conference presentations, grant applications, and more.

Figure 1: Similarities & Differences Between Grad & Undergrad Writing

The IMRaD Model of Research Writing

Often, graduate writing is much longer than a standard essay written for a class. For instance, a scholarly article can be 20-40 pages long. Long research projects will usually include a number of sections that can be lengthy, sometimes around 7-10 pages per section. This structure is often called the IMRaD model. IMRaD stands for *Introduction*, *Methods*, *Results*, *and Discussion*. Figure 2 shows the general shape of an IMRaD paper and explains each section (adapted from Swales and Feak). Note the use of the word "shape." These are not rigid, one-size-fits-all rules, but rather a conceptualization of what most graduate research writing generally looks like in a broader sense. Disciplinary conventions and genre will further sculpt the shape of the document.



Introduction: This is the roadmap for the document. It can contain any of the elements of the CARS model (page 3), as well as background, context and a thesis. It is connected to the discussion section. The introduction usually provides a glimpse of the final results and implications of the research; these should not be a big surprise at the end of the document.

Methods: This section will have the greatest variation between disciplines. These are the means, or analytical tools, used to collect and interpret data. These are the steps a reader should be able to follow to replicate the study. When discussing methods, some of the results may be mentioned in order to establish how the methods were used.

Results: The results discuss what the researchers' findings were. When discussing results, each result should have a clear relation to the method it correlates to.

Discussion: This is where the results should be interpreted, and a claim will be made. Implications for future research should be explored here, and connections should be drawn to key information in the introduction.

Misc.: Some documents will contain abstracts, which summarize the entire document in a paragraph. Some will have analysis sections which can be in the results, after the results, or in the discussion.

Figure 2: IMRaD Model of Research Paper Organization

Creating a Research Space (CARS)

There is not a one-size-fits-all approach to academic writing across the disciplines; however, researchers have identified a number of commonalities in writing across the disciplines and have mapped this information onto models we can use. This is known as genre analysis: readers read a series of texts from a single genre (e.g., introduction sections; abstracts; etc.) to help them determine the conventions of that genre. One model consultants can use when working with graduate writers is John M. Swales' (1990) CARS model: Creating a Research Space. The CARS model identifies a number of frequent rhetorical moves that are often found in introductions to academic scholarship. Readers can expect that the introduction of a scholarly article will include at least some of the steps identified by Swales and shown in Figure 3 beside potential questions consultants might ask graduate writers.

Rhetorical Move	**Steps used to make the rhetorical move**	**Questions you can ask**
Move 1: Establish a Territory	Step 1: Claim importance *and/or* Step 2: Make topic generalizations *and/or* Step 3: Review items of previous research	• What is the main topic? • Why is the author discussing it? • What is the importance? • Is research provided to support the claim?
Move 2: Establish a Niche	Step 1a: Counter-claim *or* Step 1b: Indicate a gap *or* Step 1c: Raise questions *or* Step 1d: Continue a tradition	• How is the topic narrowed or focused? • What is new about it? • What is the gap? Where is it stated?
Move 3: Occupy the Niche	Step 1a: Outline purposes *or* Step 1b: Announce present research Step 2: Announce principle findings Step 3: Indicate article structure	• What is the purpose of this research? • What were the principle findings? • How will the rest of the article be structured?

Figure 3: Tutoring Using the CARS Model

This model can be useful for you in two ways:

1. You can apply it specifically when reading the introduction sections of graduate documents, especially IMRaD documents. Look for the rhetorical moves and steps in the introduction. If you can't find them, ask the writer about them. While the CARS model cannot cover every possible discipline and genre, it can be a useful tool for critically reading and discussing the introduction sections of graduate work. You might use questions such as the following to guide your thought processes:
    a. What rhetorical moves is the writer employing?
    b. What similarities/differences do you notice between this writing and the model?
    c. If it feels like something is missing from the introduction, is it one of these three rhetorical moves?
    d. What could be added to the introduction or elaborated on?

   e. Is there information in the introduction that doesn't fit into this model? If so, that information may be necessary, or it may not be, depending on the discipline.

2. Often, graduate writers have questions about how they *should* compose an introduction in their discipline. You can model for them how to conduct a genre analysis using CARS.
   a. Ask them to find a published article from their field.
   b. Explain the CARS model.
   c. As the writers look at the introduction of the article they found, they should identify the moves each paragraph is making (what each paragraph is *doing,* not what it is saying).
   d. Ask them about what they notice, and share your own observations with the writer.

3. Apply genre analysis to other sections of a document. If writers are not sure how to write an abstract, for instance, they can look at what each sentence in the abstract is doing (what moves it is making). By comparing the moves made in a number of different published abstracts, they can begin to form an understanding of what an abstract should include. This can help them to write their own.

Guidelines for Clarity in Complex Writing

In their article "The Science of Scientific Writing," George D. Gopen and Judith A. Swan claim that "complexity of thought need not lead to impenetrability of expression" and that the "fundamental purpose of scientific discourse is not the mere presentation of information and thought, but rather its actual communication." We would add that *all* complex writing, and not just writing for the sciences, should aim for "actual communication" through clear, concise writing. Often, writers attempting to express complex ideas produce unclear writing as they attempt to work through their ideas. When a reader complains about lack of clarity, the problem is attributed to the reader not understanding the complex content rather than to lack of clarity at the writing level. If you find yourself adrift in a sea of disciplinary jargon, long and complicated sentences, and complex content, here are five guidelines adapted from Gopen and Swan's guidelines that you can use to analyze the text and help the writer clarify the writing.

- A subject and a verb should be as close together as possible. When a string of words and/or punctuation disrupts the subject/verb connection, it is easy for a reader to get lost.
- The actor of a sentence (note this might be a thing not a person) should be placed at the beginning of the sentence, when at all possible, so that it is doing the action rather than receiving it. (*The boy threw the ball*, rather than *the ball was thrown by the boy*; *answers to interview questions revealed excessive misunderstanding on the part of the audience*, rather than *excessive misunderstanding on the part of the audience was revealed by interview questions*.)
- New information should be placed in a sentence where it will receive emphasis; usually, this is toward the end of a sentence. In other words, writers should place the content they want to emphasize in the location where it will receive natural emphasis from the structure of the sentence.

- Old information should be placed before new information as it provides context; try to avoid presenting new information without first providing that context.
- The action of every clause or sentence should be expressed as a clear, *strong* verb.

Style Guide Variations among Academic Disciplines

If there is a one-size-fits-all rule in this guide, it is that there is no one-size-fits-all rule for writing across the disciplines. This is especially true for style and citations in the disciplines. In your own coursework, you've likely been introduced to a citation style such as MLA, APA, Chicago, or IEEE. You probably already know that each guide cites sources differently, but they also advise on certain style issues differently. Here are some key differences to keep in mind:

- **Formatting:** Each style guide will have different expectations for font size, margin width, the use of section headers, etc.
- **Verb Tense:** There are different recommendations for what tenses to use in certain situations. In APA, past tense should be used for results while conclusions should be in the present. In MLA, all texts should be discussed in the present tense, even if they were written 500 years ago.
- **First Person:** We've all heard the command to "never use 'I' in academic writing," but that simply isn't true. This varies from guide to guide. For example, APA allows the use of first-person when reporting one's research results. Always check the pertinent guide to see which rhetorical situations allow for first- and second-person.
- **Citations:** What information is necessary and what order it goes in differs from guide to guide. If a writer has questions about what to include in citations, it is always best to double-check with the appropriate style guide.

There are guidelines other than MLA, APA, Chicago, and IEEE that other disciplines follow, and academic journals can also have their own unique style conventions. Additionally, these are just a few examples of major differences between style guides; there are many more. When a writer has questions about issues that could fall under the conventions their discipline follows, the best practice is to locate the appropriate style guide and aid the writer in finding an answer to the question. Remember that you are also modeling for the writer a skill that can be used with future documents.

Strategies for Responding to Graduate Student Writing

- Talk with the writer. Ask questions about their work and what they are doing—this is work that they should be excited about. Getting them to bring that energy to the table can help build strong foundations for the session.

- If a writer is asking questions about the content of their document, such as if their methods are accurate or if their results make sense, you may not be able to provide answers to those questions. You should politely, but firmly, explain to the writer that you can work on their *writing* with them, but questions about content can best be answered by experts in their field such as their advisors.

- Keep it reader-centered. Use phrases such as "As a reader outside of your field, this idea isn't clear to me" or "how would a reader in your field approach this?"

- Use a "dummy reader" to soften critique; rather than "I don't understand this sentence" you can say "Readers may not understand this sentence because of _____."

- If the organization of a document seems off, practice reverse outlining. Have writers identify two things in each paragraph and write them in the margins: 1) the main topic of the paragraph and 2) how the paragraph advances the argument. Writers may identify multiple topics in a paragraph, their topic sentences may not actually introduce what they identify as the main topic of the paragraph, or a paragraph may not advance the argument. This information can help you talk to writers about the organization of their document even if you do not clearly understand all of the content.

- Use the CARS model for introductions or genre analysis to navigate texts you are unfamiliar with or to help a writer try to figure out the conventions of a specific document.

- Ask to look at supplemental materials. If their interaction with a source isn't quite making sense, ask if they have the source with them, or if they can bring it to a future session. If there are questions about style or citations, refer to the style guide they are using.

- If you are unsure what should be in a document such as an abstract, and the writer doesn't know, try looking up the information on the Purdue OWL with the writer.

- When in doubt, ask "what is customary in your discipline?"

Questions to Ask & When to Defer to Content Experts

The line between being an expert on writing and being an expert on content can be hard to draw at times since content and writing are so intimately connected. When a writer has questions about their content, it is important to know what you can and cannot answer. Figure 4 offers some examples of how a tutor might respond when asked about discipline-specific concerns outside their own area of expertise. If a writer can't answer the questions you ask in that situation, encourage the writer to discuss the concern with colleagues, their advisor, or other experts in their field.

It is ok to say "I don't know" as long as it is followed by
"but let's see if we can find an answer."

A tutor is not expected to…	Instead, a tutor can…
Be able to identify if a causal relationship is appropriately expressed, if the methods and results make sense together, or if a specific conclusion can be reached from this data.	Ask: • Are these methods based on methods used in another study? • Did they have similar results? • Is the relationship between the intervention and the results (i.e., cause & effect) expressed appropriately for your field?
Know the correct way to say something in a specific discipline or field, or know the appropriate amount of hedging to use.	Ask: • Have you encountered that term/phrase in your research? • How has it been used in the literature you've read? • Can you make this claim as strongly as you are doing here?
Know disciplinary content that is outside their own expertise.	Ask: • Where did you read that information? • Can you double check with that source? • As a reader outside your field, I wonder X. Should that be included here, or will your readers already know that?
Know the intricacies of every style guide.	Say: • Style guides update their material so frequently that it is difficult to remember everything; I find that it helps to always double check with the guide. • When I write a paper, I always double check with the guide to be sure that I am remembering all the picky bits correctly. Let's look that up to be sure.
Know the intricacies of where each piece of a document should be placed.	Ask: • Is that where that type of information is commonly placed in documents in your field? • Where do the sources you cited place similar information?

Figure 4: Questions to Ask When Confronted with Discipline-Specific Concerns

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