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Lucy Bryan Malenke

James Madison University, lucybgreen@gmail.com

Laura K. Miller

James Madison University, mille4lk@jmu.edu

Paul E. Mabrey III

James Madison University, mabreype@jmu.edu

Jared Featherstone

James Madison University, feathejj@jmu.edu

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How Genre-Trained Tutors Affect Student Writing and Perceptions of the Writing Center

Lucy Bryan Malenke

(James Madison University)

Laura K. Miller

(James Madison University)

Paul E. Mabrey III

(James Madison University)

Jared Featherstone

(James Madison University)

Abstract Writing center scholars have long debated whether writers are best served by “generalist” tutors trained in writing center pedagogy or “specialist” tutors with insider knowledge about a course’s content or discipline-specific discourse conventions. A potential compromise that has emerged is training tutors in the purposes and features of specific genres. The writing center literature showcases many different approaches to genre training.

However, little empirical research, if any, has explored how tutors’ genre knowledge affects session outcomes. The present study used a mixed-methods approach to compare session outcomes for students who worked with generalist and genre-trained tutors. We analyzed pre-consultation and revised literature review drafts to determine whether students who worked with tutors trained in the genre of literature reviews improved their drafts more or revised their drafts differently than students who worked with generalist tutors. Additionally, we performed a qualitative analysis of student reflections about their writing processes to explore how tutor training impacts students’ impressions of their consultations. Findings indicated that students who worked with genre-trained tutors revised their drafts more substantively than did students who worked with generalist tutors. Moreover, students who worked with genre-trained tutors left with notably better and richer impressions of their consultations.

Keywords writing center, genre theory, generalist tutor, specialist tutor, writing in the disciplines, tutor training, disciplinary expertise

In institutions of higher education across the world, writing center tutors work with writers who vary not only in their abilities and approaches to writing but also in their disciplines and the types of writing tasks in which they are engaged. On a given day, the same tutor might assist a history student with

planning an analysis essay, help an English language learner revise a lab report for a biology course, and then discuss a draft of a research proposal with a graduate student in nursing.

Does the training that most writing center tutors receive adequately prepare them to serve writers from unfamiliar disciplines,

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especially those composing in specialized genres? Tutor training often focuses on general principles (such as valuing process over product, cultivating awareness of rhetorical situations, and developing sensitivity to interpersonal and institutional power dynamics), as well as best practices (such as following session management protocols, prioritizing higher order concerns, and helping writers draw broad lessons and strategies from the particulars of a session). For more than 30 years, writing center scholars and practitioners have debated whether writers from disciplines other than English and composition are best served by “generalist” tutors trained in writing center pedagogy or “specialist” tutors who possess additional knowledge about a course’s content or discipline-specific discourse conventions.

More recently, writing center scholarship has posited tutor training in genre as a middle ground between specialization and generalization. This growing body of literature suggests that writing centers can harness certain benefits of expertise without taking on the logistical burden of specialization by training tutors in the purposes, features, and contexts of the types of writing they are likely to see in their sessions. While many practitioners have shared their approaches to genre training, research is needed to determine how such training shapes the outcomes of writing center consultations.

The present study responded to that need by comparing writing produced by students who worked with generalist and genre-trained tutors, as well as contrasting their impressions of the writing center. We used a mixed-methods approach in order to explore the effects of genre training from multiple angles. First, we performed a rubric-based analysis of pre-consultation and final drafts of literature reviews composed by 15 students in a required research methods course within a communication studies major. We used this quantitative approach to investigate whether students who worked with tutors trained in the genre of literature reviews improved their drafts more or revised their drafts differently than students who worked with generalist tutors. Next, we performed a qualitative analysis of

student reflections about their experiences in the writing center to explore how tutor training in genre impacts students’ impressions of their consultations.

Literature Review

Susan Hubbuch (1988) was the first to argue in favor of generalist tutors. Drawing upon a decade of writing center experience, she contended that tutors who are “ignorant” about a paper’s subject matter are especially attuned to the logic of ideas and, by necessity, force writers to articulate complex concepts and take responsibility for the clarity and coherence of their papers. Tutors with disciplinary knowledge, she warned, may encourage passivity in writers by being too directive; may inadvertently communicate that the writer is incompetent; may impose personal preferences instead of seeking out the teachers’ preferences; and may be tempted to emphasize product over process. Others have described additional benefits of the generalist approach: For example, Michael Pemberton (1995) and Carol Severino and Mary Trachsel (2008) have argued that when writers possess more knowledge about course content or discipline-specific conventions than their consultants, that helps balance the power in a session. Generalist tutors are also likely to ask questions about audience and purpose, which can draw writers’ attention to rhetorical situations and encourage richer, less egocentric representations of writing tasks (Harris, 1992; Pemberton, 1995). Moreover, a tutor’s lay reading of a text may inspire discussion that helps the writer see a topic afresh or break out of conditioned patterns (Pemberton, 1995).

Some writing center scholars, however, have questioned the assumptions that underlie arguments in favor of generalist tutoring, particularly for writers in the disciplines. Judith Powers and Jane Nelson (1995) pointed out that the “discovery-based approach to conferencing depends upon the writers’ ‘knowing’ but not recognizing the answers to their own questions” (p. 13). If writers are unaware of the conventions for a particular writing task or within a distinct discipline (which may well be

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their motivation for visiting their writing centers), their tutors will not be able to draw out answers, even with deft questions (Robinson & Hall, 2013). This issue may be of particular concern for writers whose backgrounds limit their access and exposure to academic discourses. For example, Lori Salem (2016) has pointed out that “women, students of color, English language learners, and students with less ‘inherited merit’” (p. 160) are more likely to feel frustrated with nondirective tutoring strategies, which work best for students “who have solid academic preparation—who already have a pretty good idea of what kind of text they are expected to produce—and who already feel a sense of self-efficacy and ownership over their texts” (p. 163). Similarly, Harry Denny, John Nordlof, and Lori Salem (2018) found that working-class writers often come to writing centers in search of “mentors who can provide generous and proactive support and who don’t wait for students to ask for help or expect students to be able to articulate their needs” (p. 86).

When it comes to writing in the disciplines, Linda Shamoon and Deborah Burns (1995) pointed out that many experts report learning to write through “intrusive, directive, and product-oriented” instruction, which they perceive not “as an appropriation of power or voice but instead as an opening up of those aspects of practice which had remained unspoken and opaque” (p. 139). Directive tutoring, they maintain, allows writers to observe and emulate and may be most effective for intermediate and advanced writers attempting to compose in their disciplines. These claims are supported by research from Christopher Kilgore and Courtney Cronley (2021), which found that graduate students in social work needed detailed explanations of “their assignments’ audiences, tasks, and contexts.” They warned that a shared inquiry process is less likely to be successful if both the student and tutor are equally unfamiliar with the genre (p. 276).

The demand for discipline-specific tutoring in writing has led to the creation of specialized writing centers, such as the one at the Medical University of South Carolina, as well as professional consultant positions, such as the writing resource coordinator position in the School

of Social Work at the University of Texas at Arlington (Kilgore & Cronley, 2021; Kilgore et al., 2013; Smith et al., 2011; Walker, 1998). Traditional writing centers have also sought to improve tutors’ disciplinary knowledge by inviting faculty to staff meetings to describe their course’s content, their expectations for writing assignments, or the features of writing tasks in their disciplines (Burkert, 2014; Harris, 1992; Murphy, 1991; Walker, 1998). Additionally, programs that embed writing tutors in courses facilitate specialization by exposing them to situated knowledge about course material, assignment types, and disciplinary conventions (Gladstein, 2008).

Much of the literature surrounding the debate over generalist and specialist tutoring relies on theory and personal observations, but “the few empirical studies that have been done challenge the effectiveness of generalist tutors,” as Sue Dinitz and Susanmarie Harrington (2014) pointed out in their study of tutor expertise (p. 13). In particular, several studies have shown that generalist tutors working with writers in unfamiliar disciplines tend to focus on surface features at the expense of global issues, despite being trained to prioritize higher order concerns (Dinitz & Harrington, 2014; Kiedaisch & Dinitz, 1993; Mackiewicz, 2004). In their in-depth analysis of seven consultations involving writing from the disciplines of political science and history, Dinitz and Harrington (2014) found that tutors “without knowledge of the conceptual framework, key terms, and disciplinary expectations for the paper” displayed several notable patterns (p. 85): Their sessions progressed linearly, addressing superficial concerns one at a time; they uncritically accepted writers’ statements and avoided challenging writers’ points of view; and they neglected opportunities to connect local issues to broader lessons. Moreover, Jo Mackiewicz (2004), in her linguistic analysis of four writing tutors’ interactions with engineering students, found that nonexpert tutors made forceful suggestions that “arose out of their automatic and uncritical application of conventions of academic essay and research paper writing” but were inappropriate for engineering writing (p. 322).

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On the other hand, these studies showed that tutors with some degree of expertise were more likely to focus on higher-order concerns (such as audience and purpose), to appropriately modulate the strength of their suggestions, to push back against limiting ideas, to pose questions to stimulate the writers' thinking, and to draw broader lessons from discussions (Dinitz & Harrington, 2014; Kiedaisch & Dinitz, 1993; Mackiewicz, 2004). Two studies recorded instances of a knowledgeable tutor making overly directive suggestions about content, but this problem was relatively rare (Dinitz & Harrington, 2014; Kiedaisch & Dinitz, 1993).

A critical issue with these studies—and the generalist vs. specialist debates overall—is that they do not consistently define disciplinary knowledge or expertise. Scholars have alternately (and sometimes interchangeably) characterized the specialist tutor as one acquainted with the assignment's subject matter (Hubbuck, 1988), who has taken the same course as the writer (Gladstein, 2008), who is enrolled in the writer's major (Devet, 2014; Severino & Trachsel, 2008), who knows the assignment (Kiedaisch & Dinitz, 1993), who has taken courses in the discipline (Dinitz & Harrington, 2014), who has experienced the process of producing a paper in a discipline (Soven, 2001), who is familiar with a discipline's writing conventions (Kohn, 2014; Plummer, 2015), or who understands a discipline's genres or subgenres (Smith et al., 2011).

Some of these notions of expertise have caused scholars and practitioners to question the feasibility of using specialist tutors. As Bonnie Devet (2014) pointed out, "No directors can hire tutors for every discipline at a college or university" (para. 5), and as Dinitz & Harrington (2014) conceded, "trying to regularly match students with tutors in their discipline would bring on a logistical nightmare" (p. 95). Asking tutors to acquire content knowledge for specific assignments or courses—for example, to understand procedures for certain kinds of laboratory experiments—is also impractical in most cases (Kohn, 2014). Moreover, as Sarah Summers (2016) has explained, expertise is "fluid and relational" (p. 128). A tutor may be a specialist in one session and a generalist in another,

assuming dramatically different roles depending on the session's topic, the assignment, the writer's needs, the tutor's experience, and the power dynamics at work in the session. Thus, the generalist-specialist binary oversimplifies the nature and function of expertise in writing consultations.

A potential compromise has emerged in the writing center literature: training tutors in genres (or meta-genres) that they are likely to encounter in consultations. Scholars have increasingly advocated for genre training as a practical way to import the benefits of expertise into consultations, and their recommendations are shaping tutor training and practice (Burkert, 2014; Clark, 1999; Devet, 2014; Kohn, 2014; Mackiewicz, 2004; Plummer, 2015; Robinson & Hall, 2013; Summers, 2016; Walker, 1998). Genres are not merely standard forms of writing with set structure, style, and formatting conventions; they are the products of recurring social contexts in which writers must communicate messages about certain topics to specific audiences for particular purposes (Clark, 1999). Thus, tutor training in genre focuses on writing conventions and rhetorical knowledge, as opposed to content knowledge. As early as 1998, Kristen Walker, the assistant director of an electrical and computer engineering writing center, suggested that writing center directors reach out to experts to learn about disciplinary cultures, analyze written products to learn about a field's genres, and provide tutors with models and descriptions of genres "within a discussion of social context" (p. 33).

More recently, writing center directors have taken an array of approaches to equipping tutors with genre knowledge and preparing them to discuss genre within sessions. For example, at York College, graduate writing fellows worked with instructors in a writing across the curriculum program to identify especially challenging writing assignments (Robinson & Hall, 2013). Then the fellows, in collaboration with writing center tutors, developed "discipline- and assignment-specific tutoring tools"—one-page worksheets with assignment descriptions, genre conventions, and specific strategies to be used during writing center consultations. Liberty Kohn

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(2014) took a different approach to training tutors in her institution's writing center in the scientific genres they were most likely to encounter. That training focused on how to differentiate academic and professional genres, science writing conventions (such as the use of paraphrase as opposed to quotation), and common structures of scientific genres (such as the introduction-methodology-results-discussion report). Similarly, the University of Wisconsin-Madison offered its tutors an "Ongoing Education" seminar in science writing (Burkert, 2014). Participants read book chapters and viewed presentations about science writing, met with a science writing editor, discussed conventions and rhetorical moves in scientific genres, reviewed a sample draft of a grant application abstract, and compiled a list of principles for working with science writers. At Indiana University Bloomington's writing center, director Laura Plummer (2015) placed tutors in a "Working Group" in one of three "mega-disciplines" (social sciences and education, hard sciences, and humanities) or in first-year composition. Writers who visited the center could then select tutors from the appropriate Working Groups, which met regularly to discuss assignments, concerns, and discipline-specific tutoring strategies.

These efforts signal an important trend in tutor training—a focus on genre knowledge that has undoubtedly been shaped by the generalist-specialist debates and is often framed as a middle ground between the two approaches. However, little empirical research, if any, has explored the effects of writing center tutors' genre knowledge on session outcomes. The present study aims to fill that gap.

Methods

This IRB-approved study occurred at a mid-Atlantic comprehensive public university, where the University Writing Center is located within the Learning Centers and reports to the vice provost.

Tutor Training

All tutors take a three-credit course that trains them to assist students across disciplines and

genres. Subsequently, groups of tutors receive additional professional development in specialized areas (e.g., multilingualism, genre training, online tutoring). To develop expertise in their specialized areas, students meet monthly in small groups, led by an experienced faculty member. For this study, tutors in a genre-focused professional development group received four hours of instruction over the course of three sessions on features and types of literature reviews. Tutors analyzed literature reviews from several disciplines, role-played with sample student literature reviews, and discussed tutoring strategies and approaches for literature reviews (see Appendix A for a detailed description of the training). While the University Writing Center's tutoring pool includes faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate students, all of the tutors who worked with participants in this study were undergraduate students.

Participants

Research participants were recruited from an undergraduate communication studies research methods class taught by a member of the research team. All students in the class were required to visit the University Writing Center with drafts of their literature reviews, which would later be incorporated into a project proposal, and all were given the option to opt into or out of the study by the course instructor. Of the 20 students in the class, 15 chose to participate in the study. In order to protect the identities of participants, the researchers did not collect additional demographic, social, or academic data from them.

Procedures

Study participants were randomly divided into two groups using the alphabetical order of their last names. Each group was given a list of tutor names (either tutors who had received genre training or tutors who had not received genre training), and students were instructed to make an appointment via the Writing Center's online scheduler with any one of the tutors on their group's list. The experimental group (Group 1) had eight students who worked with genre-trained tutors.

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The comparison group (Group 2) had seven students who worked with generalist tutors. Consultations were booked in hour-long appointment slots and lasted up to 50 minutes.

Students were not given any formal explanation of what to expect at the Writing Center and were required to consult with their tutors on their literature review drafts only once during the semester. They also shared and received feedback on their drafts from peers during class and from the course instructor. At the end of the semester, students were asked by the course instructor to attach to their research proposals a cover letter that reflected on their progress on the project over the course of the semester. They were asked to specifically address changes in their research topics, their Writing Center appointment experiences, and their revision strategies.

Data Analysis

We opted to collect students' first and final drafts for analysis because they are indirect measures of success that are valued by instructors and students. Although written products cannot measure the full gains from a tutoring session, they have been examined in various studies in the literature (e.g., Dinitz & Harrington, 2014; Dvorak et al., 2012; Miller, 2020).

Research occurred in two phases: First, the course instructor collected 15 pre- and 15 post-intervention literature review drafts and removed all identifying information. The remaining three members of the research team (all Writing Center faculty members) rated the essays using a trait-scoring rubric that included five traits: Purpose, Organization, Support and Development, Style, and Usage, Mechanics, and Formatting (see Appendix B). Before rating, the three faculty raters normed by discussing the rubric and sample literature reviews. Each rater was randomly assigned to rate drafts such that each draft was rated by two faculty researchers. Each person scored essays individually and then compared scores with the other rater for those drafts. Rater pairs identified any discrepancies in scoring and then came to consensus through discussion, rather than relying on a third rater (Johnson et al., 2005). After all rating was complete,

we tabulated scores and assigned drafts to their corresponding treatment groups. We used SPSS software to conduct the Wilcoxon signed-rank test, which provided comparison data between groups and across the five elements of the rubric.

In phase two, we analyzed students' reflection essays. We first read through the 15 essays individually to identify emerging patterns, and then we co-created a coding schema with 26 codes. Based on these codes, we identified the following overarching categories:

- Confidence
- Desire for more directive advice
- Foci of tutoring session
- Impression of the appointment
- Peer review
- Perception and expectations of the UWC
- Training classification
- Transferable skills
- Tutor knowledge or experience
- Tutoring methods
- Unfamiliarity with genre

We used NVivo software to identify and tabulate themes that emerged from the codes, and then we interpreted two major findings germane to our research questions.

Results

Quantitative Results

In order to evaluate whether students who worked with genre-trained tutors improved their drafts more than students who worked with generalist tutors, we compared the differences in scores between first drafts (pre-session) and final drafts (post-session) for students in each group. We used Wilcoxon signed-rank tests rather than the more common paired-sample *t*-test to compare changes in first and final draft ratings. We did this because one of the most important assumptions in using a parametric test like the *t*-test is that the data are normally distributed, but our data sets were not normally distributed (Field, 2013, p. 228). Small samples (seven and eight students in each group, or 15 total) and the

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Table 1. Results of Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Tests on Literature Review Traits by Group

Trait	Score	Mdn	M	Z	p	r
Generalist						
Purpose	First draft score	1.0	1.57	0.82	0.41	0.31
	Final draft score	1.0	1.86			
Organization	First draft score	2.0	1.86	0.74	0.46	0.28
	Final draft score	2.0	2.23			
Support	First draft score	2.0	1.64	1.89	0.06*	0.71
	Final draft score	2.0	2.14			
Style	First draft score	2.0	1.86	1.34	0.18	0.51
	Final draft score	2.0	2.29			
Usage	First draft score	2.0	2.14	-1.0	.32	-0.38
	Final draft score	2.0	2.00			
Total	First draft score	9.0	9.36	1.10	0.27	0.42
	Final draft score	9.0	10.57			
Genre-Trained						
Purpose	First draft score	2.0	2.50	1.41	0.16	0.50
	Final draft score	2.5	2.75			
Organization	First draft score	2.25	2.44	1.73	0.08*	0.61
	Final draft score	2.75	2.81			
Support	First draft score	3.0	2.63	0.45	0.66	0.16
	Final draft score	3.0	2.75			
Style	First draft score	2.0	2.38	1.41	0.16	0.50
	Final draft score	3.0	2.63			
Usage	First draft score	2.0	2.19	1.09	0.28	0.39
	Final draft score	2.0	2.38			
Total	First draft score	11.25	12.13	1.68	0.09*	0.59
	Final draft score	12.75	13.31			

Note. Generalist group $n = 7$; genre-trained group $n = 8$

* Approaching statistical significance ($p = .06 - .10$)

limited rubric range (1–4) contributed to the non-normal data distribution. Furthermore, medians (rather than means) are the measure of central tendency typically reported with the nonparametric Wilcoxon signed-rank test, but we included both medians and means in our tables to help with interpretation and inferences. Occasionally, statistically significant differences between first and final draft scores may exist even when their medians are equivalent, because the test is not a comparison of medians but a comparison of the rank sum of data against the expected rank sum.

We examined improvements in overall literature review scores (the total of the individual

trait scores) using the Wilcoxon signed-rank test. The students working with generalist tutors did not have statistically significant overall score gains between their first and final drafts. However, the score improvements made by students working with genre-trained tutors (first draft, $Mdn = 11.25$; final draft, $Mdn = 12.75$) approached statistical significance, $p = .09$ (see Table 1). The coincidence that students who worked with genre-trained tutors had higher pre-intervention scores than students who worked with generalist tutors will be discussed further in the Limitations section.

We were also interested in whether students revised their drafts differently (i.e.,

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whether they focused on improving different aspects of their literature reviews) based on which type of tutor they worked with in the Writing Center. To ascertain this, we ran Wilcoxon signed-rank tests for each trait in the literature review rubric, comparing gains made by students who worked with generalist and genre-trained tutors (see Table 1). Generally, we were unable to detect statistically significant outcomes by trait between the two groups. However, students who worked with generalist tutors did make gains that approached statistical significance in the support category (first draft *Mdn* = 2; final draft *Mdn* = 2), $p = .06$. Meanwhile, students who worked with genre-trained tutors made gains approaching statistical significance in the organization category (first draft *Mdn* = 2.25; final draft *Mdn* = 2.75), $p = .08$.

After the Wilcoxon signed-rank tests failed to yield many statistically significant differences between groups, we decided to analyze the first and final drafts without differentiating by tutor type (see Table 2). As a whole, the students made notable gains in both their overall literature review scores and their trait scores. We found that the overall scores on the final drafts (*Mdn* = 11.5) were statistically significantly higher than the scores on the first drafts (*Mdn* = 10.0), $p = .05$. Students also

made improvements approaching statistical significance in both organization and style.

Qualitative Results

Analyzing students' reflection essays yielded two major findings related to our research questions. First, when we analyzed students' perceptions of their Writing Center experiences, we found substantial differences between those who worked with generalist tutors and those who worked with genre-trained tutors (see Table 3). Most notably, genre-trained tutors' sessions were perceived more favorably. Sixty percent of students had positive things to say about their sessions at the Writing Center, and the overwhelming majority of these students (8/9) worked with genre-trained tutors. Students who worked with genre-trained tutors wrote in their reflection essays:

- "I feel I successfully narrowed my topic and my paper has a good flow from broad to specific. My writing center appointment also helped with this. The person I made the appointment with was helpful in helping me to decide when I should get more specific throughout the intro and literature review. Also, the writing center

Table 2. Results of Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Tests on Literature Review Traits in Total Sample ($n = 15$)

Trait	Score	Mdn	M	Z	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>
Purpose	First draft score	2.0	2.07	1.41	0.16	0.36
	Final draft score	2.0	2.33			
Organization	First draft score	2.0	2.17	1.64	0.10*	0.42
	Final draft score	2.0	2.57			
Support	First draft score	2.0	2.17	1.48	0.14	0.38
	Final draft score	2.0	2.47			
Style	First draft score	2.0	2.13	1.34	0.06*	0.35
	Final draft score	2.0	2.47			
Usage	First draft score	2.0	2.17	0.38	0.71	0.10
	Final draft score	2.0	2.20			
Total	First draft score	10.0	10.83	2.00	0.05**	0.52
	Final draft score	11.5	12.03			

* Approaching statistical significance ($p = .06 - .10$)

** Statistically significant ($p \leq .05$)

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Table 3. Perceptions of the Writing Center

	Desire for more directive advice	Mixed	Negative, not helpful	Positive, helpful	UWC not mentioned
Generalist	2	0	5	1	1
Genre-trained	1	0	0	8	0

Note. This table references the number of participants who expressed the indicated perceptions of the University Writing Center in their end-of-semester reflections on their writing processes.

appointment was helpful to me because I got confirmation on how I should break up the paper into different themes.”

- “I found my writing center experience to be very successful. My tutor was extremely helpful, kind, genuine, and knowledgeable on the subject. This was my first literature review ever, so to have someone who had some experience on the subject truly helped me. As well it gave me insight to truly what a literature review is, because even after it had been explained to me in class and online, I still was a bit confused on the idea. We started off by talking about my topic and what exactly I wanted to do with my research and its goals. We then discussed my sources and how applicable they were to my research. After giving her an idea about my research and ideas we began to read my literature review. My paper was very unorganized in its structure so that was one of the first things we discussed. We organized the structure to better help the top down approach of general context to gaps, then to my research specifically. Some of my sentences were a bit confusing to read out loud so after reading them aloud it better informed me of how to properly write down my ideas. My APA citations were incorrect in some parts as well which I wouldn’t have known if she had not told me. Overall, my tutor was incredibly helpful in guiding me on my first literature review and I feel much more prepared to write more.”

Unfortunately, one third of students expressed negative impressions of their UWC appointments. Most notably, every single dissatisfied student worked with a generalist

tutor. For instance, students said in their reflection essays:

- “The tutor did not fully understand the purpose of a literature review. I feel as though having an extremely knowledgeable individual to discuss my ideas with would have been beneficial.”
- “The student assigned to work with me was very nice, but seemed overwhelmed by the ten page document I set in front of her, and I’m not certain she really knew what a literature review was.”

The data also suggest that students wanted more directive advice, particularly from those who worked with generalist tutors. About 20% of the students expressed a desire for more explicit instruction about how to write a literature review—two of those worked with a generalist tutor, and one worked with a genre-trained tutor.

The reflections indicated that students believed that the quality of their sessions hinged on their tutors. This theme emerged in comments like “I do believe the success of the appointment laid in the hands of who was assisting you, but for me, it was uneventful.” For this writer, the session seemed unproductive because the generalist tutor only focused on surface-level concerns. Conversely, others indicated that if they were “lucky enough to get a person that knew a substantial amount about literature reviews” (as one student put it), their time in the Writing Center was well spent. Students working with genre-trained tutors explicitly linked session success to tutor expertise. For instance, one student said, “I thought that it was very helpful because the writing center tutor that I worked with was able to give me a better understanding of what

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a literature review should include, and worked with me extensively to make my literature review better.” In other words, the session was useful because the tutor was knowledgeable about the purpose and features of the genre.

The second finding that emerged from our analysis of reflection essays is that students who worked with genre-trained tutors offered richer recollections of their sessions when describing their writing processes at the end of the semester. In their reflections, these students discussed specific advice they received and the resulting changes that they made to their structure, organization, source analysis, and style—a trend evidenced by the longer quotation above. On the other hand, students who worked with generalists mostly described their sessions in general terms. They said things like “All I accomplished within the time of my appointment was reading my paper aloud and recognizing what sounded coherent or not.”

Discussion

The results of this mixed-methods study offer insights into the ways tutor training in genre affects students’ writing and their impressions of their sessions. The quantitative results of this study offer encouragement to writing center practitioners, whether they employ generalist, specialist, or genre-based approaches to tutoring. As a whole, students in this study improved their literature reviews in all of the assessed traits after visiting the Writing Center, making statistically significant gains in total score. While it is impossible to isolate the effects of writing center consultations from other interventions the students engaged in over the course of the semester (including in-class peer reviews and professor conferences), there is reason to believe that students’ visits to the Writing Center played a part in these improvements, as previous scholarship has shown that tutor feedback tends to influence the focus of students’ revisions (Bleakney & Pittock, 2019; Williams, 2004).

This study did not find statistically significant evidence that students who worked with genre-trained tutors improved their literature review drafts more or revised their

drafts differently than students who worked with generalist tutors. It’s likely that the small sample size and the limited number of scores on the trait rubric (discussed further in Limitations) hindered our ability to detect such differences. However, there were some trends approaching statistical significance that warrant further discussion and exploration.

Notably, the median overall scores of the two groups indicated that students who worked with genre-trained tutors made greater gains in their revisions than did students who worked with generalist tutors. The medium to large effect sizes of the scores provide further support for this inference, especially in the absence of statistically significant differences between the groups. In short, our quantitative findings suggest that a limited, genre-focused intervention for tutors may prepare them to engage writers in discussions that lead to effective, substantive revisions.

Additionally, assuming that revisions to some extent reflect the topics discussed in a writing center consultation—an inference supported by the student reflections in this study as well as previous research (Bleakney & Pittock, 2019; Williams, 2004)—the present study’s median trait scores by group indicate that generalist and genre-trained tutors bring different foci to their sessions. Students who worked with generalist tutors made the greatest gains in the category of “support” between drafts, while students who worked with genre-trained tutors improved most in the “organization” category. This trend confirms what we know about generalist tutor training—namely, that it equips tutors to discuss broadly applicable concepts, such as how to marshal evidence to support claims. Similarly, it comes as no surprise that tutors trained in the genre of literature reviews are well prepared to guide students in deploying the common organization patterns of the genre (e.g., a broad-to-narrow structure, an introduction that contextualizes the problem the research will respond to, and a concluding paragraph that offers a research question or hypothesis).

While this study’s quantitative analysis of writing scores yielded inconclusive results, the qualitative data from student reflections on their Writing Center experiences

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offer much more compelling support for genre training. Namely, students who worked with genre-trained tutors walked away with notably better impressions of their Writing Center consultations than students who worked with generalist tutors.

As Aaron Colton (2020) has pointed out, “attending an appointment at a writing center registers among the most powerful forces in cultivating impressions of center services” (p. 33). Those impressions are important because they have the potential to influence both students’ willingness to seek help at the writing center in the future and what they tell their peers about the writing center. Comments from student participants confirm this correlation: As one student who worked with a genre-trained tutor reported, “This was my first time using the writing center . . . but I plan on using it more after my experience.”

These findings also have implications for the sense of belonging that students experience in the Writing Center. Impressions of consultations may signal whether or not writing centers are meeting the needs of the particular populations they serve. As recent scholarship has highlighted, students’ social identities (e.g., gender, race, class), backgrounds (e.g., non-native English speaker, first-generation college student), and status within their disciplines and programs (e.g., novice, graduate student) affect their needs and expectations, and in turn, how well they respond to particular tutoring strategies (Denny et al., 2018; Kilgore & Cronley, 2021; Salem, 2016). Students who feel their Writing Center consultations did not meet their needs might wonder if they belong in the Writing Center at all and whether or not the Writing Center’s services are meant for students of their identity, background, or status. Our small sample size and the need to protect the confidentiality of our participants prevented us from collecting such information from our research participants, so we are unable to speculate as to whether this may have been the case for any of the students in our study.

However, nearly half of our research participants underscored their status as disciplinary novices by mentioning their initial lack of familiarity with or misunderstanding of the

writing task in their reflections. This reality undoubtedly shaped the needs (e.g., for clarification of genre conventions) and desires (e.g., for directive advice and explanations) that they brought to the Writing Center. It follows, then, that a majority of students’ reflection essays mentioned their tutors’ knowledge of (or lack of familiarity with) the genre conventions of literature reviews. These patterns affirm Heather Robinson and Jonathan Hall’s (2013) observation that “it is often precisely the context and conventions that are at the heart of a student’s difficulties, especially in highly technical subjects and those with particularly specific rhetorical conventions” (p. 30).

Impressions aside, the fact that students who worked with genre-trained tutors offered much richer recollections of their sessions in their end-of-semester narratives indicates that they applied what was discussed in their sessions to the revision process. Their descriptions also indicated that they acquired knowledge and skills that could be transferred to future writing tasks in their sessions. As one study participant put it, “Overall, my tutor was incredibly helpful in guiding me on my first literature review and I feel much more prepared to write more.” Indeed, Hill (2016) has pointed out that understanding genre goes hand in hand with transfer of learning: genre knowledge helps students to avoid negative transfer (such as inappropriately applying the conventions of the five-paragraph essay) and to engage with abstract concepts (like discourse communities) that “[transcend] individual writing situations” (p. 95).

Similar to our project, Hill’s (2016) study of transfer in the writing center underscored that tutors may lack the knowledge needed to assist writers in “complex discussions of the genre-specific nature of writing conventions” (p. 94). Tutors, she said, should receive in-depth training in genre theory alongside training in transfer theory—training that includes more than just the formal features of common genres. She advocated for adapting the approach outlined in Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak’s (2014) book *Writing across Contexts: Transfer, Composition, and Sites of Writing* to train tutors to (1) “know how to accurately use” key concepts (such as context and

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discourse community), (2) “understand the value of reflection” at all stages in the writing process, and (3) “have an accurate and complex theory of what writing is and how writing works” (Hill, 2016, p. 96). As Nowacek et al. (2019) argue, tutors are well poised to engage writers in “transfer talk” when they ask questions like “What experience do you have with writing literature reviews?”

The genre training offered as a part of this study primarily focused on the features of literature reviews and common struggles that students have when writing literature reviews. While tutors did have the opportunity to consider some contextual variables, such as the audiences and purposes of literature reviews, we acknowledge that they would have benefited from a broader review of genre theory, including the ways that discourse communities shape genre conventions, as well as an explicit discussion of how to talk about genre in ways that might facilitate transfer.

Limitations

As in many intervention studies, it is difficult to untangle the many variables that may have influenced our results. Given the lack of control group in this study, we could not fully separate the impact of one writing center session from other influences, including peer review and instructor feedback. It is also important to note that all generalist tutors receive some genre training through the standard course, and all tutors inevitably have varying levels of expertise and experience, which could account for some of the differences. For this study, we did not observe significant correlations between tutor experience levels and tutoring efficacy, but these variables could affect outcomes differently in other studies. Although the effects of these intermingling variables are relevant when reviewing the quantitative data, the reflection essays provide a useful context for interpreting the results and suggest that genre training impacted session quality.

We are also unable to know how requiring students to visit the Writing Center might have affected their willingness to apply their tutors’ advice or their impressions of their sessions. The literature on this topic suggests that

required visits for whole classes generally lead to positive impressions of the Writing Center and a willingness to return for future visits, despite many writing center practitioners’ beliefs to the contrary (Gordon, 2008; Pfrenger et al., 2017; Wells, 2016). It is possible, in the case of this study, that the requirement might have led participants to believe that tutors were trained to work with literature reviews or even familiar with their particular assignment. Such expectations could have exacerbated the frustration and disappointment felt by students who worked with generalist tutors who seemed unfamiliar with the genre. More research is needed to understand how writing center visitation requirements shape students’ expectations for their sessions.

We were also limited by our sample size. A larger sample with a normal data distribution would make further analyses possible and would likely resolve random discrepancies in our data. As displayed in Table 1, genre-trained tutors had notably higher overall scores than those who worked with generalist tutors in both their first drafts (*Mdn* = 11.25 vs. *Mdn* = 9) and final drafts (*Mdn* = 12.75 vs. *Mdn* = 9). This discrepancy in performance is coincidental, as students were randomly assigned to groups, and we were still able to compare groups based on changes in score between first and final drafts (a benefit of a research design that measures growth, rather than focusing solely on a single piece of writing). That said, the high performance of students in the experimental group meant that they had slightly less room to improve than their lower-performing counterparts in the comparison group. A larger sample size would probably yield more comparable mean and median scores prior to the intervention, which would eliminate concerns about whether differences in outcomes for the groups might have been obscured by the different starting points of their participants.

Finally, the small number of scoring options on the rubric likely means that some changes between first and final drafts went undetected. Although adding proficiency levels might have posed a challenge to the researchers tasked with developing the rubric and might have necessitated more consensus-building discussions among raters, a more nuanced rubric

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probably would have provided a clearer picture of the differences between groups.

Conclusion

Many writing centers are built upon Stephen North's (1984) now-famous dictum: "Our job is to produce better writers, not better writing" (p. 438). This study, however, complicates the assumption that tutors best serve their clients by focusing on general writing principles as opposed to the specific demands of a writing task. Our data indicate that, at least in some contexts, students not only improve their papers but also learn transferable skills after their tutors give them direct advice tied to genre. Moreover, our findings suggest that tutor expertise in genre enhances tutor ethos and positively influences writers' impressions of their writing center consultations.

This study underscores the value of mixed-methods research, which, in this case, provided more nuanced insights than a solely quantitative or qualitative approach would have done. Future research could enrich and clarify our findings by aiming for a larger sample size and by using a control group that does not visit the writing center. Additionally, researchers could better detect differences between groups and changes between drafts by employing a rubric with a 6- or 8-point scale. More research is needed to determine whether these findings remain consistent across different types of training in the genre of literature reviews or across training in other genres (for example, business proposals, personal statements, or empirical research papers).

Overall, this study affirms the promise of an important trend in tutor training. Equipping tutors with knowledge about the purposes and conventions of particular genres appears to be an effective and practical middle ground that harnesses some of the benefits of specialization without posing an undue logistical burden for writing centers.

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Appendix A: Summary of Genre Training for Tutors

SESSION 1

Objectives:

- Introduce tutors to the genre of literature reviews
- Introduce tutors to different types of literature reviews (e.g., section in a scholarly article, class assignment, chapter in a dissertation, meta-analysis)
- Introduce tutors to key literature review resources

Outcomes:

After this session, tutors should be able to:

- Identify a literature review
- Describe some of the common features of literature reviews, as well as ways they vary
- Ask questions to better understand what kind of literature review a client is working on
- Refer clients struggling with genre conventions of literature reviews to helpful resources

Agenda:

1. Two-minute paper: Write down everything you know about literature reviews.
2. Discuss as a group: What is a literature review?
3. Watch and discuss “Literature Reviews: An Overview for Graduate Students from N.C. State Libraries” (<https://www.lib.ncsu.edu/videos/literature-reviews-overview-graduate-students>).
4. Review and discuss the purposes and organizational strategies of literature reviews in the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*.
5. Activity 1: Put tutors in groups of two or three, and assign each a different scholarly article. Have them answer the following and summarize their findings for the group:
 - What discipline is this article from?
 - What is the overall purpose of the article?
 - Is this a stand-alone literature review or a larger scholarly work that includes a literature review?
 - Approximately how long is the literature review (in paragraphs)?
 - Approximately how many sources does the literature review cite?
 - Would you characterize this review as comprehensive or selective? Why?
 - How is the literature review structured? Give a brief overview of its organization.
 - If the literature review is part of a larger scholarly work, what is the overall structure of that work, and where and how does the literature review fit in?Discuss differences and similarities among articles.
6. Activity 2: In pairs (or as a whole group), write a working definition of a literature review.

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SESSION 2

Objectives:

- Prepare tutors for consultations with writers of literature reviews

Outcomes:

After this session, tutors should be able to:

- Describe common struggles that writers have with literature reviews
- Tailor tutoring approaches and strategies according to the needs of literature review writers

Agenda:

1. Explain that today we will be doing a series of tutoring scenarios involving literature reviews. The instructor will pose as the writer, and a volunteer from the group will act as the tutor. We'll do a mock session for about 10 minutes and then discuss observations and insights as a group.
2. Scenario 1: The writer is in the tutor training course, and the professor has given an assignment for which students are supposed to write a literature review about a writing center related topic of their choice. The writer is not sure how to approach the assignment, and in the session confuses the genre of literature review with annotated bibliographies, all-about-x research papers, and comparison/contrast papers.
 - Discuss writer's struggles (genre confusion, lack of purpose, lack of research strategies).
 - Discuss what to do if client is unfamiliar with genre (e.g., review the assignment sheet, explain what you know, discuss potential purposes and audiences for the assignment, find an example of a literature review in the scholarship of the writer's field, use the literature review resources on the writing center website).
3. Scenario 2: The writer is a graduate student in a rhetoric program who, for her master's thesis, is studying how different university departments can assess the "state of writing" in their majors. She's collected original research using surveys and interviews and is at the point where she needs to write the literature review section for her thesis. She has a massive binder full of articles she's read and isn't sure what to include and how to start pulling everything together.
 - Discuss writer's struggles (overwhelm with condensing a huge amount of information, difficulty identifying trends/themes, trouble understanding role of literature review in broader project).
 - Discuss what to do if the writer needs help brainstorming or planning a literature review (e.g., ask the writer to articulate what question or problem in the field that the literature review will respond to, choose inclusion/exclusion criteria for sources, discuss methods for organizing/keeping track of sources, help the client create a source matrix, assist in grouping sources and identifying themes/trends, assist in creating an outline).
4. Scenario 3: The writer is an undergraduate student in a psychology course, and he's brought his literature review draft to the UWC to get some feedback. The draft has a number of problems that are common for students new to the genre of literature reviews: There are not enough sources (more research is needed), some of the sources are too old, the writer summarizes one source at a time rather than synthesizing, and analysis happens only briefly at the end.
 - Discuss writer's struggles
 - Discuss what to do if a client needs to do more research (e.g., show writer how to access library subject guides, help client book appointment with a departmental librarian)
 - Discuss what to do if a client's having trouble synthesizing (e.g., visit writing center's online resources on synthesis, create an idea map, create or revisit the source matrix to identify trends and themes).

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SESSION 3

Objectives:

- Review typical audience, purposes, and genre features of literature reviews
- Review common struggles students have with literature reviews
- Practice diagnosing problems in a real draft of a literature review written by a student

Outcomes:

After this session, tutors should be able to:

- Use knowledge about the genre of literature reviews to diagnose common problems in a literature review draft

Agenda:

1. Review and discuss as a group:

- What is a literature review?
- Who are the typical audiences for literature reviews? (instructor in a course, a thesis or dissertation committee, scholars in a field, practitioners in a field)
- What are the purposes of literature reviews?

According to APA:

- To define and clarify a problem
- To summarize previous investigations to inform the reader of the state of research
- To identify relations, contradictions, gaps, and inconsistencies in the literature
- To suggest next steps in solving a problem

For assignments coming into the writing center, may be:

- To demonstrate research skills
- To demonstrate understanding of (or expertise in) a specific topic, method, or theory.
- To show the ability to organize, synthesize, and evaluate information.
- To situate research in a broader scholarly and historical context
- To demonstrate that project topic advances collective understanding in the field
- To establish a framework for evaluating the results of a project
- What are the key features or writing conventions of a literature review? (synthesis of research, thematic organization, few quotations/ lots of summary and paraphrase, formal language, lots of citations, subheadings/sections in longer literature reviews)
- What are some of the common pitfalls or problems students have when writing literature reviews? (lack of familiarity with genre, lack of purpose, reading comprehension issues, difficulty organizing/ managing lots of research, summarizing instead of synthesizing, transitions between ideas)

2. Activity: Have tutors read sample student paper.

- Discuss higher order concerns (e.g., organizational issues, doesn't seem to target appropriate audience, vision for project unclear)
- Discuss later order concerns (e.g., lack of transitions, claims that need qualification, terms that need to be defined or clarified)
- Mock session: Ask if someone would be willing to play tutee for this paper while the instructor models effective tutoring strategies.
- Discuss pros and cons of different tutoring strategies in the session (e.g., reverse outlining vs. reading out loud)

3. PowerPoint presentation/recap: Tutoring strategies for literature reviews

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Appendix B: Literature Review Rubric

PURPOSE. The purpose of a literature review is to identify, define, and clarify a problem, gap in knowledge, or issue to be addressed by the proposed research project. In doing so, it should provide an overview of the state of knowledge on the topic through a synthesis of previous research. A literature review should survey appropriate, relevant, and up-to-date sources. It also should persuade the reader of the scholarly significance and need for the proposed research project.

Beginning (1)	Developing (2)	Competent (3)	Advanced (4)
Reads as a dump of information, potentially taking the form of an “all about X” paper. Fails to connect the information to broader scholarly conversations or to use the information to justify the proposed project.	Provides some context for the scholarship included in the review and begins to identify a research problem or gap. Contains some synthesis of scholarship but fails to provide a cohesive representation of the scholarly conversations surrounding the topic of the proposed project. May include some information that lacks relevance to the proposed project.	Synthesizes scholarship related to the proposed research project. A story is beginning to develop that demonstrates the relationships between relevant scholarly conversations and the proposed project.	Clarifies the research problem, gap, or issue to be addressed by the proposed research project. Strategically examines relations, themes, and trends in the literature in order to build a case for both the significance and need of the research project.

ORGANIZATION. A well-organized literature will guide the reader through the scholarly conversation surrounding a topic, setting up the specific contribution(s) the proposed research project will make to that conversation. The literature review should employ a broad-to-narrow structure, opening with context for the problem or issue the project will address, then explaining relevant relations, themes, and trends in existing literature, and ultimately highlighting the gap(s) or need(s) that the project will address. When appropriate (often at the end of the literature review), the literature review will present the proposed project’s research question or hypothesis. Paragraphs or sections should synthesize groups of related sources according to concept, theory, or methodology, rather than summarizing sources one at a time. A well-organized literature review will exhibit coherence, demonstrated by effective transitions, a logical flow of information within and among paragraphs, and balance among its various components.

Beginning (1)	Developing (2)	Competent (3)	Advanced (4)
Exhibits little strategic or deliberate organization. Lacks overall structure, and ideas appears randomly ordered. Lacks transitions between and within paragraphs. May not use paragraphs, or the division of paragraphs may lack logic.	Has some sense of order, but is confusing or inconsistent. The order of information does not effectively set up proposed research project or embed it within a broader scholarly conversation. May rely on formulaic or inconsistent organizational patterns and may not balance ideas appropriately in the paper. May have redundancies or circle around ideas. May move from study to study or author to author.	Displays a deliberate attempt to organize ideas. Has some transitions that shepherd the reader through the literature on the topic, but there may be missing information, abrupt turns, and/or out-of-sequence ideas. Has synthesis that connects thematically related studies within paragraphs or sections, but some studies, authors, or articles may not be fully integrated.	Demonstrates a deliberate organization that follows a broad to narrow structure. Seamlessly and efficiently transitions between ideas. Paragraphs and sections synthesize related bodies of literature as opposed to summarizing single authors or sources.

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SUPPORT & DEVELOPMENT. Support refers to the way the writer uses prior scholarship to develop ideas throughout the literature review and within its paragraphs and/or sections. A well-developed literature review will analyze and critically evaluate the literature, utilizing details and examples from sources to provide evidence for its claims and to elaborate key points. It should go beyond superficial evaluations to provide commentary characterized by depth and complexity.

Beginning (1)	Developing (2)	Competent (3)	Advanced (4)
Support and development are severely lacking or absent. Problems with attribution, citation, and plagiarism may be present. If claims about the literature are present, they are not accompanied by adequate evidence and examples. Observations about and evaluations of sources, if present, may be uncritical, illogical, or contradictory. Heavily relies on quotation, and little to no attempt to integrate sources into sentences.	Support and development are faulty or inconsistent. Writer attempts to analyze prior scholarship but offers problematic conclusions that may be vague or simplistic or rely on sweeping generalizations. More sources may be needed. Commentary on sources may be underdeveloped or rely heavily on others' observations. May demonstrate a reluctance to criticize the methods, findings, or conclusions in prior scholarship. Descriptions of source material often lack details and examples or include unnecessary details and examples. Doesn't adequately integrate sources into sentences, often lacking transitions that connect the sources to the surrounding ideas.	Support and development are consistent and logical. Analysis and evaluation of the literature are present and bolstered by evidence that is appropriate and, for the most part, effective. Occasionally, there may be too few or too many details and examples to support claims and points. Commentary reflects critical thinking but may sometimes seem formulaic or warrant further elaboration or explanation. Uses formulaic techniques to integrate sources into sentences.	Support and development demonstrate complexity and sophistication of thought. Carefully selected details and examples support the author's original analysis and evaluation of the literature. Commentary not only reflects depth of insight, but also an awareness of how much or how little explanation the audience needs to understand the author's points. Uses mostly summary and paraphrase over quotation, and seamlessly integrates sources into sentences.

STYLE. This trait generally refers to the choices that the writer makes for specific audiences. This may include features like tone, sentence length and structure, phrasing, and word choice. The style should be appropriate for the research area (e.g., use of 1st or 3rd person) and should employ a formal and professional tone, active voice, and precise terminology.

Beginning (1)	Developing (2)	Competent (3)	Advanced (4)
Writing has an inappropriate tone. Sentences and phrases are simplistic, unvaried, or wordy. Writing is stiff, awkward, and difficult to follow. Unclear or incorrect use of terminology or vocabulary.	Writing has an inconsistent or occasionally inappropriate tone. Some sentences and phrases are repetitive, bland, or awkward. Writing is occasionally difficult to follow. Some misused vocabulary or inconsistent terminology. Word choice may be ineffective.	Writing has a consistent and appropriate tone. Sentences and phrases are typically concise and effective but may be somewhat mechanical. Writing is easy to follow. Terminology or vocabulary is appropriate and sensible but may be predictable.	Tone contributes to reader comprehension. Uses varied sentence structure and phrases to convey meaning and to create interest and engagement. Vocabulary is sophisticated, precise, and varied.

USAGE, MECHANICS, & FORMATTING. This trait generally addresses issues dealing with writing convention, citation style, and formatting. Features may include grammar, mechanics, usage, citation, punctuation, formatting, and capitalization.

Beginning (1)	Developing (2)	Competent (3)	Advanced (4)
Contains errors across most of the areas of grammar, mechanics, usage, citation, punctuation, formatting, and capitalization. Problems interfere with meaning or distract the reader.	Contains errors across some areas of grammar, mechanics, usage, citation, punctuation, formatting, and capitalization. Problems may, on occasion, compromise meaning or distract the reader.	Few to no errors across most of the areas of grammar, mechanics, usage, citation, punctuation, formatting, and capitalization. The writing reads smoothly, and problems do not compromise meaning.	Demonstrates mastery of grammar, mechanics, usage, citation, punctuation, formatting, and capitalization. May use language and punctuation to enhance meaning.

Note: This rubric was adapted by the researchers from one used by the Engineering Department at their university.

Bryan Malenke

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Miller

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Mabrey

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Featherstone