

Writing & the role of your supervisor

Perhaps more than any other document in this series, this one represents my personal preferences and some ideas to work well with me on written work. Written communication is an essential part of graduate school. Over our time working together, we will write e-mails, scholarship applications, abstracts, manuscripts, theses, blog posts, REB applications, knowledge translation flyers- this list is potentially endless. Each of these forms of writing belongs to a particular genre, with specific expectations for format, tone, and style.

Writing is an important part of graduate work, especially when you are using qualitative methods- language becomes not just your way of describing your data, it is your data. As Kamler and Thompson describe, “writing is a vital part of the research process. The activity of research is one that, from the outset, involves writing” (p. 3). Writing isn’t just something that happens at the end of your thesis, it is an important component of the planning, data collection, analysis, and communication phases.

Meredith’s vision of the ideal student-supervisor writing process

1. Discussion about the aims, objectives, goals of the piece. What components are necessary, optimal, optional, unnecessary. Often (but not always) this conversation takes place with the rest of the committee or team.
2. Student produces an outline, sketch, draft to show sections and main points. Review (with written feedback or by discussion). Decide on a reasonable deadline for circulation of the next stage.
3. Student operationalizes the outline, pushing it as far as possible. Student sends to me by the agreed-upon deadline, along with a quick memo re: areas that feedback is needed on, questions that remain, sections that feel awkward etc.
4. I send feedback. Because I knew I would be receiving the work on a particular date, I blocked time in my calendar to make sure that I can return feedback within one week.
5. Student looks at feedback, a conversation (by email or in person or by phone) to clarify significant points if necessary. Student proposes new deadline, and I block time in my calendar accordingly.
6. Continue until both are satisfied with the state of the draft. Circulate to committee members, co-authors, others who should be included.

Meredith’s Pet Peeves about the student-supervisor writing process

1. Drafts that land in my inbox unexpectedly, especially with a request for a quick turnaround. I want to give you feedback quickly, and I want to give you thorough, thoughtful feedback. Right now (October 2017) I am working with 16 graduate students as a supervisor or committee member. I also have a host of other research projects I am involved in. There’s a lot of writing that lands in my inbox and if I don’t know that yours is coming, it will likely take me a while (2-5 weeks) to get to it. If we discuss a deadline, then I will block time in my calendar and

respond to you quickly. If you miss your deadline, you might miss the blocked time and end up in the 2-5 week pile.

2. Poorly written, grammatically incorrect work. I'm not your copy editor. I feel strongly that my job is to provide substantive, scholarly feedback and not to correct your spelling, grammar, syntax etc. Please, please send me something that is clearly expressed. If you need help with spelling, grammar etc. we can talk about writing resources (there are some at the end of this document). Outlines etc. don't need to be perfect but once we get into longer more complete drafts, take the time to go over your written work to ensure that it is clean and easy to read. Nothing makes me grumpier than a draft that hasn't even been spell-checked.

More about editors and graduate writing:

- 1) McMaster University Graduate Calendar: General Regulations of the Graduate School, item 2.7.1 "Graduate Work Supervision Guidelines for Faculty and Students"
 - a. The supervisor/advisor is expected to encourage increasing independence as the student progresses through graduate work. Although the supervisor/advisor is not expected to be a copy editor for the student's written work, he/she should review and provide feedback on materials that the student produces prior to external review or defence.
- 2) The Supervisor as Editor (this is very long):
<http://www.textjournal.com.au/oct09/krauth.htm>
- 3) What not to expect from your PhD Supervisor:
<https://www.findaphd.com/advice/doing/phd-supervisor-expectations.aspx>

Key phrase from this document: "As with so many parts of a healthy supervisory relationship, the golden rule is simple. *The advice is theirs; the work is yours.*"

Some writing resources:

1. The Student Success Center offers Academic Skills and Writing Assistance Clinics, both group and individual sessions.
<https://studentsuccess.mcmaster.ca/academic-support/academicsupport/>
2. Grammarly is a great resource to help with your writing. It is no longer free for McMaster students, but McMaster does offer a 50% discount:
<http://library.mcmaster.ca/php/suggestionbox.php?f=recordbrowse&library=ALL&id=968>

3. The Writer's Diet has several resources, and allows you to copy a section of your written work in for automatic identification of "paunchy prose".
<http://writersdiet.com/>
4. Lorelei Lingard has written a series of quick, concrete tips for academic writing as a series in the journal *Perspectives on Medical Education*. You can find them by searching for "Writer's Craft" in that journal.
5. Purdue's Online Writing Lab has a host of resources:
<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/1/2/>
6. There are many books about academic writing. Helen Sword is a very popular author. Her titles include *Stylish Academic Writing*.
7. Your peers! There are beautiful writers hidden (and not so hidden) among us. Don't be afraid to ask for some tips. Even just reading examples of how someone else has structured their work can be helpful.