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WRITING TO THE MIDDLE: THE EFFECTS OF UNDERGRADUATE WRITING CURRICULUM ON THE CONFIDENCE OF AUDIOLOGY GRADUATE STUDENT WRITERS

Mckinzee Hubachek

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Researcher: Kinzee Hubachek, AuD Graduate Student

Research committee: Kathryn Bright, Ph.D., Tina Stody, Ph.D., Kimberly Murza, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

During their graduate coursework, audiology graduate students are required to engage in a variety of different writing activities. However, the types of writing required in undergraduate studies might not have properly equipped audiology graduate students for the type of writing they will do during a doctoral program. This is especially the case with long form projects such as capstones or dissertations. Students likely have not had to complete projects requiring multiple iterations and revisions prior to their graduate coursework. Audiology is unique in that students often transition directly from their undergraduate studies to their doctoral work with no intermediate writing education. Very little research exists to assess the proficiency and confidence of graduate writers in audiology. This study explored the content of undergraduate writing courses and how these courses affected the skill and confidence of graduate writers in audiology. Specifically, confidence in the areas of grammar and mechanics, organization, and content were explored in the present study. Through survey measures, a positive linear trend between writing skill based on number of classes taken during undergraduate studies and confidence in writing was identified.

INTRODUCTION

Writing skills are among some of the most critical for students in audiology. Cooper and Bikowski (2007) identified no less than 11 unique writing tasks graduate students might encounter during their studies. Emanuel, Robinson, and Korczak (2013) assessed the writing abilities of audiology graduate students using the Audiology Writing Assessment (AWA) and noted some incoming audiology graduate students had difficulty composing an essay from the information they read in assigned articles. To achieve an AWA score indicating the expected writing skill of a student at a graduate level, several students required 15 to 30 hours of tutoring to bring their skill to a level appropriate for graduate level writing (Emanuel et al., 2013). This research raised several questions about the writing ability of graduate students in audiology.

Sallee, Hallett, and Tierney (2011) recognized that many graduate students simply did not get enough writing practice in their undergraduate studies. DeLyser (2003) noted few writing courses were designed to help students write longer pieces, such as dissertations or theses, and many students had never written an assignment more than a few pages in length. DeLyser also noticed her students had a difficult time with revision and not all students understood the importance of improving their project through multiple drafts.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

- Q1 What are the number and types of writing courses taken by audiology graduate students in their undergraduate studies?
 - Q2 What are the perceptions of audiology graduate students about their own writing ability, especially with regard to the following sets of writing skills: grammar, mechanics, and American Psychological Association (APA, 2009) formatting; organization; and content?
 - Q3 Is there a relationship between undergraduate writing experiences and an audiology graduate student's perceived writing confidence?
- H1 Students will report having taken only an introductory level English course in their undergraduate studies, and have limited experience with writing through their undergraduate curriculum.
- H2 Students will report not being fully confident in all areas of writing skills.
- H3 Students who received less undergraduate writing instruction will report more perceived weaknesses in their own writing.

METHODS

Audiology Graduate Students:

- N: 163
- Inclusion Criteria: Student must have been working on graduate capstone, thesis, or dissertation (approx 2nd-3rd year of graduate program), or have completed such a project within the last five years
- Exclusion Criteria: Student graduated more than five years ago

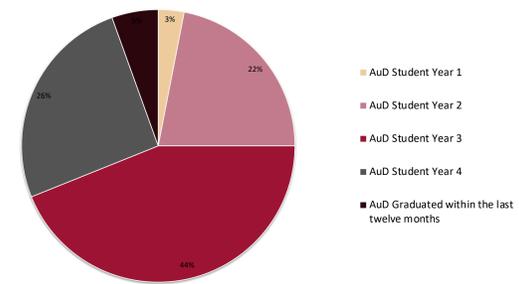
Survey

- Was available from October 4, 2018 to November 5, 2018
- 22 questions total
- Created to identify three primary things:
 - (a) the number and types of writing courses taken by audiology graduate students in their undergraduate studies as well as types of writing assignments completed;
 - (b) the perceptions of audiology graduate students about their own writing ability, especially with regard to grammar, mechanics, and APA (2009) formatting, organization, and content; and
 - (c) whether there was a relationship between undergraduate writing experiences and an audiology graduate student's perceived writing strengths and weaknesses.

Data Analysis

- Descriptive statistics were used to analyze data
- Determining the relationship between undergraduate writing experience and a student's perceived strengths and weaknesses was accomplished by comparing three of the surveyed areas of confidence to a student's reported writing skill.

Participant demographics



RESULTS

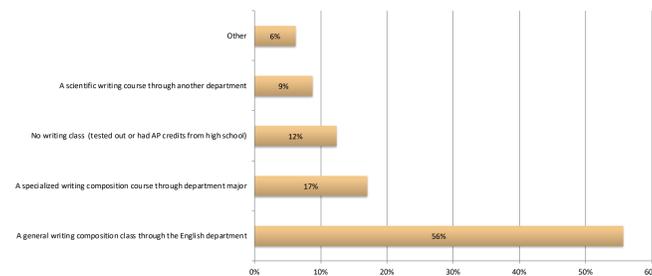


Figure 2. Types of writing classes respondents took (rounded to the nearest whole percentage point).

Project	Types of Projects never completed	One project completed	Two projects completed	Three or more projects completed
Research paper	8.08%	21.38%	21.55%	24.62%
Paper critiquing or evaluating a book, research article, or essay	2.31%	12.00%	23.28%	34.00%
Undergraduate capstone project (such as McNair, honor's or other research project)	40%	29.08%	5.17%	1.94%
Paper arguing a point of view	3.46%	13.48%	32.75%	30.00%
Creative narrative, poetry, screenwriting, etc.	29.62%	24.11%	16.58%	7.98%
Other	16.54%	0%	0.86%	1.53%
TOTAL	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Table 1
Projects Completed in Undergraduate Studies

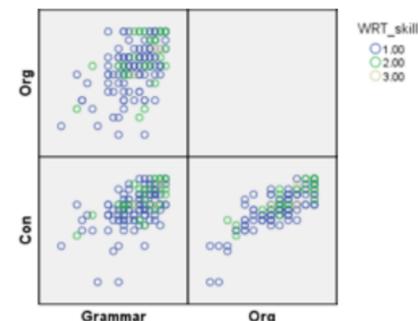


Figure 14. Relationships among grammar, organization, and confidence based on number of classes taken in undergraduate programs.

	N	Questions about each skill	Minimum points	Maximum points	Mean points	Std. Deviation
Grammar and mechanics	163	8	8	40	34.5706	3.93460
Organization	163	4	8.00	20.00	16.2638	2.80174
Content	163	5	4	25	19.8405	3.37735

Table 2
Confidence in Areas of Surveyed Writing

I asked participants, "Do you feel the writing coursework you had in your undergraduate studies has prepared you for writing your audiology capstone, thesis, doctoral project, or dissertation?"



CONCLUSIONS

Preparedness for Graduate Level Writing

Several factors affecting audiology graduate writers were examined, including their undergraduate writing experience and their own perceptions of their abilities as graduate writers for completing a thesis, capstone, or other extensive writing projects. Participant 4 in this study summed up their feelings on the matter: "Scientific writing is difficult. Ultimately, I feel less confident because I have not done enough scientific writing."

Specific Difficulties in Writing

When asked about what audiology graduate students had been taught in their undergraduate studies, rule-based and technical aspects of writing such as grammar and APA (2009) formatting were most widely chosen. Grammar and mechanics, when compared to writing skill, did not correlate with confidence in writing. When it came to more complex tasks (e.g., describing and synthesizing scientific data, which were related to the area of writing content in this study), few participants (8.22%) indicated their coursework had covered these topics. Items included within the content category were paraphrasing information from a research article, conveying complex information to a reader, and logically constructing an argument. Tasks such as these were concrete than rules about APA (2009) formatting, which could be clearly outlined and taught. Writing tasks such as organization, argument construction, or wordiness are more nuanced and require focused practice rather than simply looking up a solution in a manual. As stated by many authors and researchers, writing is a skill that must be exercised regularly to improve. Thus, audiology students fresh from their undergraduate degrees might not have focused intently on their writing skills. Data from this study showed audiology graduate students varied in the amount of writing practice they had in their undergraduate experience—some had much practice or even specialized in writing while others had minimal experience in writing.

Conclusions

Writing skills remain crucial for audiology graduate students to develop in order to succeed in their degree programs and subsequent careers. Currently, the amount of writing instruction and types of writing assignments students receive in their undergraduate studies varied widely from student to student, leaving audiology graduate students at different skill levels. In tandem with this, the amount of confidence audiology graduate students had in their own writing skills varied depending on individual experiences in their undergraduate studies. Given the relationship between undergraduate writing instruction and confidence in graduate writing, the need for additional writing support among audiology graduate students can be seen.

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CONTACT

Wanna talk writing and/or audiology? Contact Kinzee Hubachek at huba1080@bears.unco.edu

