

LLED Writing Strategy

We begin with this assumption: *all* students struggle with writing; in fact, all writers struggle. Writing is hard intellectual, linguistic, rhetorical work. It is not the mere expression of ideas already formed in the mind, but rather, the creative, cognitive, critical process of turning ideas, hunches, connections, and information into coherent and persuasive language. While the process can be exhilarating, it can also be painful and laborious.

The LLED response to this multi-faceted activity is appropriately complex, involving a variety of individual, Departmental, and University resources. In what follows, we describe those resources, and offer a sense of what students might expect from each.

Students themselves

The first and perhaps most important resource for students is themselves. It takes conscious, critical self-reflection to become a better writer. Unfortunately, schooling has often robbed students of a sense of control over their writing and their ability to make judgments about the quality of their writing processes and products. In schools, teachers are the writing masters and experts, and they own the value system that determines the quality of student work. In graduate school, it's time to develop a better sense of yourself as a writer and to regain control of your writing.

Here are some steps you can take to do that:

- begin with a careful reflection on your own writing process and products: what are your strengths? what do you like about writing? what do you struggle with? are there particular aspects of the writing process that cause you difficulty, such as getting started, generating ideas, organizing material, making persuasive arguments, or editing and revising?

- keep a writer's notebook in which you record ideas, try out new ways of formulating or defining terms or concepts, jot down useful sources or references to seek out, and otherwise support yourself as a writer and thinker. Use the notebook to write reflections on your current writing project – what's working, what's left to do, where are the blocks? That will help you become more self-conscious as a writer, and increase your ability to articulate your areas of uncertainty or struggle.

- inform yourself about the nature, expectations, and varieties of academic writing (bibliography below). A very useful resource for scholars in Education is the American Psychological Association's *Publication Manual*, which is now in its sixth edition (<http://www.apa.org/pubs/books/4200066.aspx>). The *Manual* is the standard style guide for most education journals, and has a wealth of information about scholarly writing.

- do a close analysis of academic texts – articles, chapters, term papers, research grant proposals, theses, dissertations – to determine how they are constructed. Don't just look at content (*what* they say), look at strategy (*how* they say it). Look at introductory sections and ask what's going on there. What is the author *doing* at the start of the paper? Look at how the literature review is organized, and what the author is doing with that literature. Is it a simple list of previous research? How is it structured? Why has the author chosen to cite the people cited? Does the author simply report what others say, or do they comment on it as well? Look at transitions between sections. What's going on there? And what does the author do in the final section of the paper?

- make certain to ask questions about your instructors' requirements when writing is assigned. If you aren't certain what is expected, ask for elaboration. And ask for explicit feedback on papers: if you aren't sure what your instructor thought about your paper, request a meeting and ask them to explain where and why the paper was successful and where and why it fell short of expectations. Make it clear to your instructor that you aren't challenging the grade but, instead, attempting to learn more about academic writing.

- become aware of your responsibility for deadlines, formatting, research ethics, and other regulations (<https://www.grad.ubc.ca/current-students>). Do not depend on others to inform you; but if you are uncertain about something, ask.

- develop support among classmates, either by creating a small writing group or working in partnership with another student (see Aitchison & Guerin, 2014, below). Ideally, you should not submit a paper for a course or to a journal before getting feedback from classmates whose opinion you trust; however, it takes time to build up the trust needed to have a productive but critical relationship between writers and peer reviewers.

Supervisors

Your supervisor is an accomplished member of the scholarly community, and will be able to talk to you about the role of writing in the discipline's knowledge-making, the values and expectations at play in academic writing, and where your written work meets or falls short of expectations.

However, before asking your supervisor for feedback on your written work, consider these suggestions:

- do not submit sloppy, error-filled drafts for critical appraisal. If you are uncertain about the direction of a piece of writing, speak to your supervisor (and others) about it first, rather than handing in a confusing or poorly written draft. And even early drafts should be carefully proofread and revised before submission.

- have a clear understanding with your supervisor about timing: how long will it take your supervisor to get back to you with comments on a draft? How much time will you take in preparing the next draft? In addition, if you return to a draft that you've submitted while your supervisor is reading it, let them know that. Supervisors will be understandably upset if they provide commentary on a draft that you've already revised.

- when submitting a draft, and when getting it back, make certain to communicate about it with your supervisor. When you hand it in, it might help your supervisor to know what aspects of the paper you are most concerned about, and when you collect the paper, make certain you learn as much as you can about your supervisor's assessment of the paper.

Department and University Resources

LLED Writing & Scholarship Series: The Department offers a series of workshops and seminars that focus on various aspects of writing and on various genres, including: introduction to academic writing; successful grant applications; effective course papers; persuasive literature reviews; structure and sequence in texts; editing for clarity and brevity; getting published. Look out for notices of these sessions.

LLED Exemplary Texts: The Department is compiling a set of exemplary texts which should be available soon. You will find successful SSHRC applications, sample course papers, dissertation proposals, MA theses, and PhD dissertations. Pay close attention to the structure and strategy of these texts. Again, as noted above, don't focus solely on *what* they say, look closely as well at *how* they say it. Each text has a particular audience and purpose. Who will read each text, and why? How can you tell that from the text? What is the purpose of each text—that is, what effect does the author want the text to have? How do you know that? What consequences or outcomes would make the text successful? Look very closely at introductory sections. What is the author doing there? Identifying the topic or problem to be addressed? Explaining what to expect in the text? Offering a brief outline?

Academic English Support Program (<http://aes.ubc.ca>): To quote from the website:

If you are a UBC undergraduate or graduate student who speaks English as an additional language, we can help. The UBC Academic English Support (AES) program offers free resources to improve your performance in class by advancing your academic English skills.

The AES Program offers a range of online and face-to-face resources for students, and is well worth your consideration whether you are working with English as an additional language or not.

UBC Writing Centre (<https://cstudies.ubc.ca/about-us/program-units/writing-centre>): To quote from the website:

Whether you are looking to begin or augment a career in writing or journalism, craft a perfect business letter or report, hone your storytelling and creative writing skills, or improve your academic writing, we offer a writing course that will meet your needs and help you find new approaches to shaping your words. Our courses in creative, professional, and academic writing will help you to reach your writing goals and craft your words into stories and communications that are powerful, moving, and memorable.

Like the AES, the Writing Centre offers online and face-to-face resources, including courses and one-to-one tutorials (<https://cstudies.ubc.ca/student-information/services/tutoring-services>).

Bibliography

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Some useful blogs:

Writing for research: <https://medium.com/@write4research>

Patter: Research education, academic writing, etc.: <http://patthomson.net/>

The thesis whisperer: <https://thesiswhisperer.com>

Doctoral writing: <https://doctoralwriting.wordpress.com/home/>