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“I’m Not a Writer!”

Graduate Writers’ Self-Assessment of Writing Ability and Confidence

Vicki R Kennell, PhD, Associate Director
CGC Summer Institute, June 2023



20-25 minute presentation followed by 15 min Q&A

Good afternoon. I’m Vicki Kennell, associate director for graduate education at the Purdue OWL. Today I’ll be sharing research about graduate writers’ self-assessment of writing ability and confidence. As I share the literature and some results of the study, I’d like you to consider how we might use this sort of self-assessment to plan programming for graduate students.

In addition, consider how we can assess and advocate for graduate student needs in a way that secures buy-in and resources from institutional stakeholders, since topics such as “confidence” may not resonate with an office that cares about time-to-completion—unless we can show the connection between writing ability, confidence, and graduation rates.

In today’s talk, I’ll be focusing on how one subset of graduate writers understands themselves as writers—their abilities, their experiences with a writing culture, their feelings about writing. I’ll start with some brief context and a short literature review and then share the research. We’ll close with some implications for graduate programming.

Context

Writers attending OWL programs: “I’m not a writer.”

- Indicates lack of confidence
- Excuses lack of progress

The impetus for this research project was the comment we hear from many graduate students at the OWL: “I’m not a writer.” Even though they are in the Writing Lab and actively writing a document, many graduate students don’t see “writer” as part of their identity.

This comment indicates a lack of confidence, which, as I’ll share in a moment, has implications for productivity. Such comments are also a way of excusing a lack of progress. Thus, the statement “I’m not a writer” juxtaposes feelings with productivity. As academics, graduate students are *de facto* writers, so their feelings about writing and their understanding of themselves as writers matter.

Recent scholarship also highlights these connections between feelings and productivity.

Literature—Negative Feelings vs Productivity

Russell-Pinson & Harris (2019)

- Negative feelings → Poor productivity
- Responses to stress → Procrastination & decreased performance
- Common stressors include poor time- & product-management skills

Russell-Pinson & Harris identify negative feelings as leading to poor productivity, and responses to stress as including procrastination and decreased performance. In their study, common stressors included poor time- and product-management skills. So lack of ability causes stress (a negative feeling), which leads to procrastination, which ultimately reduces productivity.

Literature—Anxiety vs Self-Efficacy

Huerta, Goodson, Beigi, & Chlup (2017)

- Writing anxiety → Lower quality & decreased amount of writing
- Self efficacy → Higher writing achievement & quality
- Strategies to build writing confidence → Increased self-efficacy → More/better writing



Huerta, Goodson, Beigi, & Chlup also found connections between emotions and productivity. Writing anxiety, in particular, resulted in lower quality and decreased amount of writing, while self-efficacy (that is more confidence in oneself), led to higher writing achievement and quality. They note that providing students with strategies to build writing confidence increases self-efficacy which then leads to more and better-quality writing. Remember that first bullet point for later in our data. Anxiety harms writing.

Literature—Community

Aitchison & Mowbray (2013)

- Importance of camaraderie with others in a similar stage of life for emotional regulation, confidence, and productivity

Vincent, Tremblay-Wragg, Déri, Plante, & Chartier (2021)

- Importance of positive social pressure for confidence and productivity



Aitchison & Mowbray in 2013 and Vincent, et. al in 2021 both highlight the importance of social interaction around writing. Camaraderie and positive social pressure can improve confidence and productivity.

From scholarship such as this, we see that negative feelings about writing, lack of confidence in oneself as a writer, and lack of writing community all contribute to lessened productivity. Our writers who stated they were NOT writers were exhibiting that lack of confidence and related lack of progress.

Research Questions

- How do graduate writers understand themselves as writers?
- What experience have they had with a writing culture?
- How do they feel when writing?



I wanted a closer look at the problem for **our particular** graduate students.

The study I'll share today focused on 3 main questions:

- How do graduate writers understand themselves as writers? In other words, when they say "I'm not a writer" are they indicating they uniformly lack ability with all aspects of writing?
- What experience have they had with a writing culture?
- And how do they feel when writing?

Methods

IRB-approved use of pre-existing data

- Program attendance data
- Anonymous surveys

Pre-program survey	Scholarly writing inventory https://tinyurl.com/PurdueSWI
Post-program survey	Evaluation



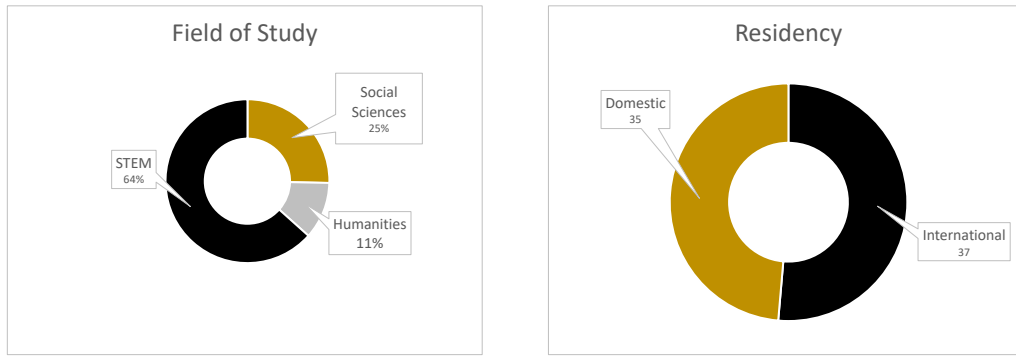
The results are drawn from two pools of data: (1) program attendance data from our summer 2022 Intensive Writing Experience for Thesis & Dissertation Writers, also known as IWE; and (2) two surveys. IWE is our version of a multi-day dissertation camp. All the material for this research project was collected originally for the purposes of running and evaluating the IWE program, so I requested IRB approval for use of pre-existing data to be able to present it here today.

The program attendance data provides demographic and document information about the survey respondents.

The first survey was pre-program. We asked everyone accepted to the IWE to complete a scholarly writing inventory. There's a tiny URL there in case you'd like to see the full inventory, which is available on the Purdue OWL. This inventory asks questions about emotional/psychological aspects of writing, writing routines, research, organization, citations, mechanics, social support, and accessing help.

The second survey was a post-program evaluation. Writers were asked typical program evaluation questions about the progress they made during IWE, what they found most helpful, etc.

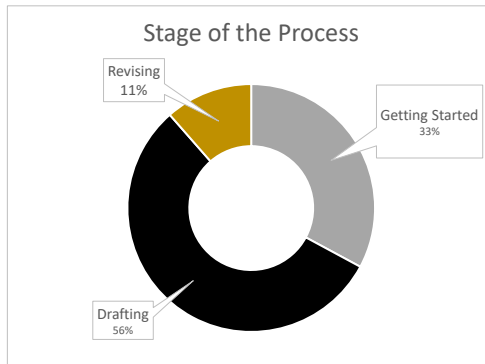
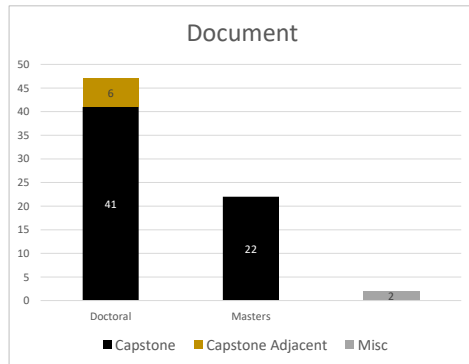
Respondents—Demographics



The 71 survey respondents included 49 doctoral students and 22 master’s thesis students, representing 41 different disciplines. In the graph on the left, you can see in the black that 64% were from STEM fields, in the gold that 25% were from social science fields, and in the gray that 11% were from the humanities.

In the graph on the right, you can see that 37 respondents (just slightly more than half) were international students—the black portion of the graph. 35 were domestic students—the gold portion.

Respondents—Document



In the graph on the left, you can see that the vast majority were writing capstone documents, indicated by the black portion of each bar—41 doctoral dissertations and 22 master’s theses. Six were writing capstone adjacent documents, indicated by the gold, such as a prospectus, and 2 were writing miscellaneous other documents.

The graph on the right indicates stage of process. Over half (56%) were in the drafting stage of the process (the black section). 33% (the gray section) were just getting started, and 11% (the gold section) were revising existing material.

So the most typical respondent for this survey was an international student in a STEM field who was at the drafting stage of a doctoral dissertation.

Results—Overview

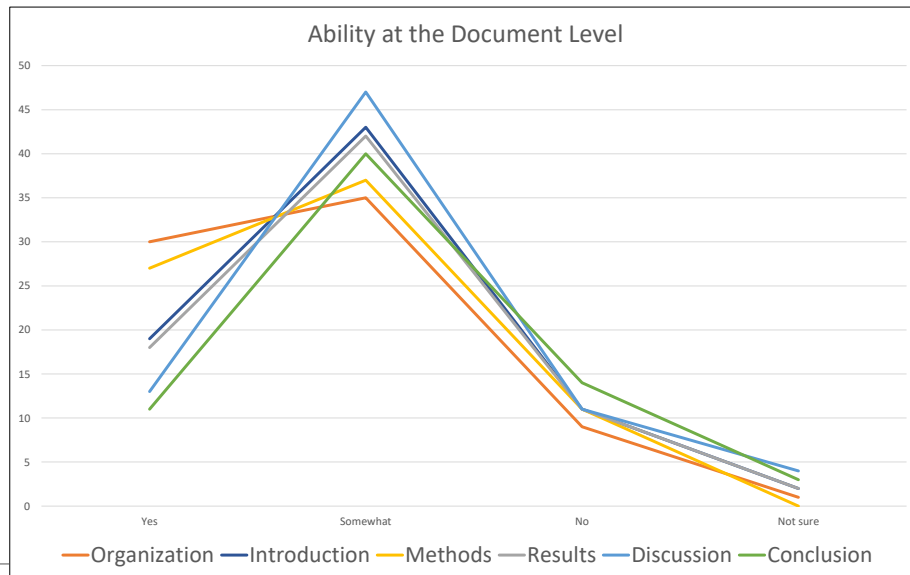
- Writing ability
- Writing culture
- Writing emotions



The pre-program survey questions were phrased around 3 primary areas: writing ability, writing culture, and writing emotions. So that is how I'll group the results today.

I'll use post-program evaluations to show how the IWE affected attendees in those three areas as well.

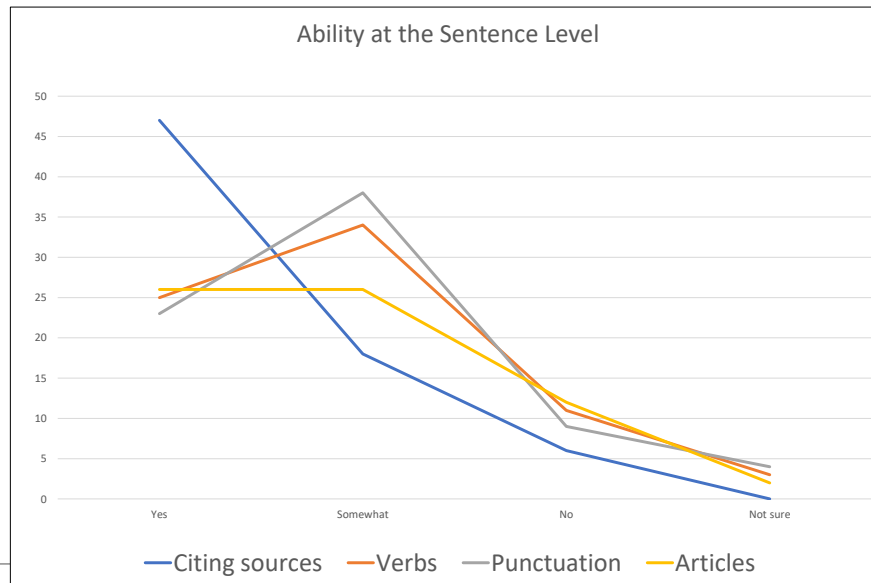
Writing Abilities



In terms of writing abilities, survey results can be grouped into document level ability, sentence level ability, and communicative abilities. This graph shows results of questions about the document level of writing, using a scale of yes – somewhat – no – not sure . We asked writers questions like “I have a good understanding of how to write introductions for my field.” Questions covered organization generally, then introductions, methods, results, discussions, and conclusions.

Organization in orange and methods in gold were seen as the strongest areas, with 30 and 27, respectively, selecting “yes, they had a good understanding for their field.” The remaining topics clustered more strongly around “somewhat” with 40+ respondents selecting that middle ground answer for each question. In general, at the document level, these writers were not 100% confident of their writing ability.

Writing Abilities



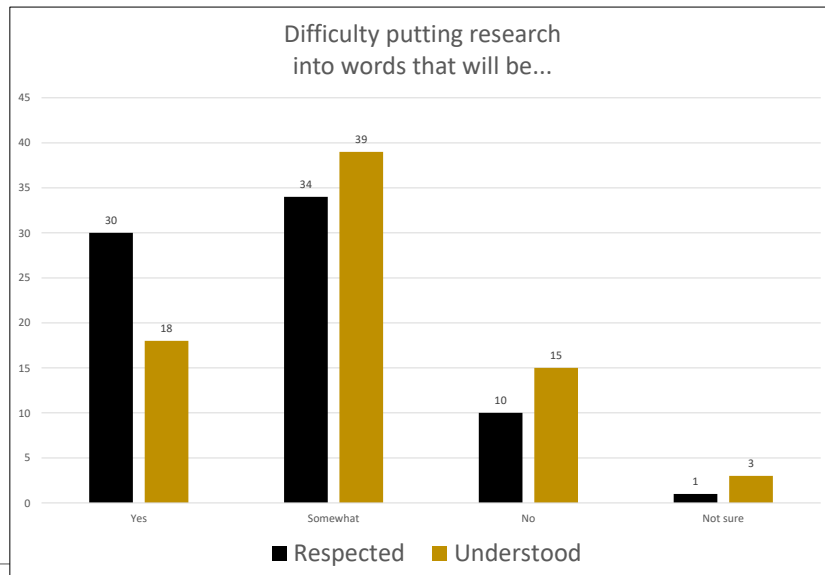
At the sentence level, we asked writers questions like “I feel like I have a good understanding of how to use punctuation in scholarly writing.” Questions asked about verbs, punctuation, articles, and citations for scholarly writing **in their field**. We see an overall pattern here that is similar to the document-level ability, with most respondents selecting somewhat.

However, all the items at the sentence level start higher on the “Yes, I have a good understanding” end (clustering around 25, in contrast to the 10-20 of the document level). They also peak slightly lower on the “I have a somewhat good understanding” option (below 40 compared to above 45 for the document level).

The exception is citing sources (the blue line), with 47 choosing yes and only 18 selecting somewhat.

Overall, it seems writers were very confident with citing sources, somewhat confident with sentence level, and less confident overall with the document level.

Writing Abilities

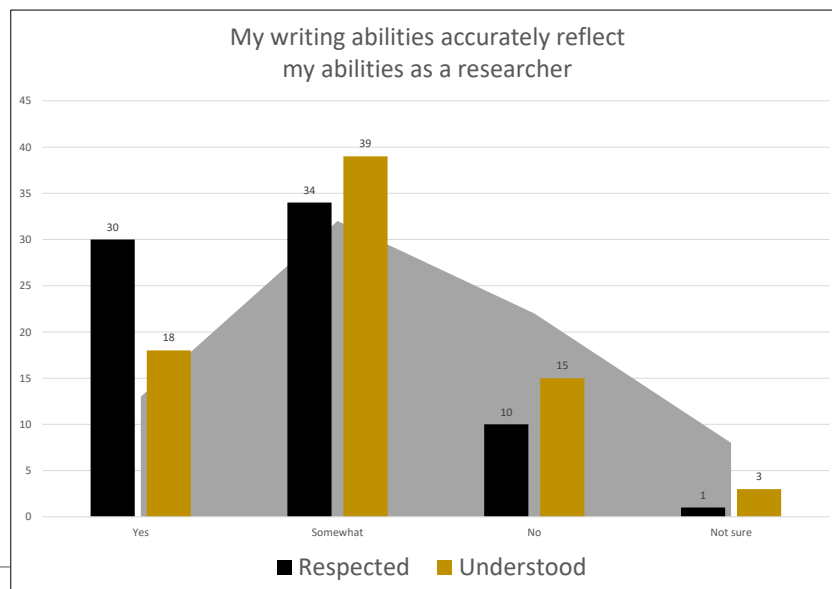


In terms of communicative writing abilities, respondents reported high levels of difficulty with putting research into words that will be **respected** by scholars in the field (the black bars), with 30 indicating yes, they had difficulty and another 34 indicating they somewhat had difficulty.

For difficulty putting research into words that will be **understood** by scholars in the field (the gold bars), 18 said yes while 39 said somewhat.

For these writers, there is definite concern about communicating with other scholars in their field, with **slightly** more concern about being respected than about being understood.

Writing Abilities

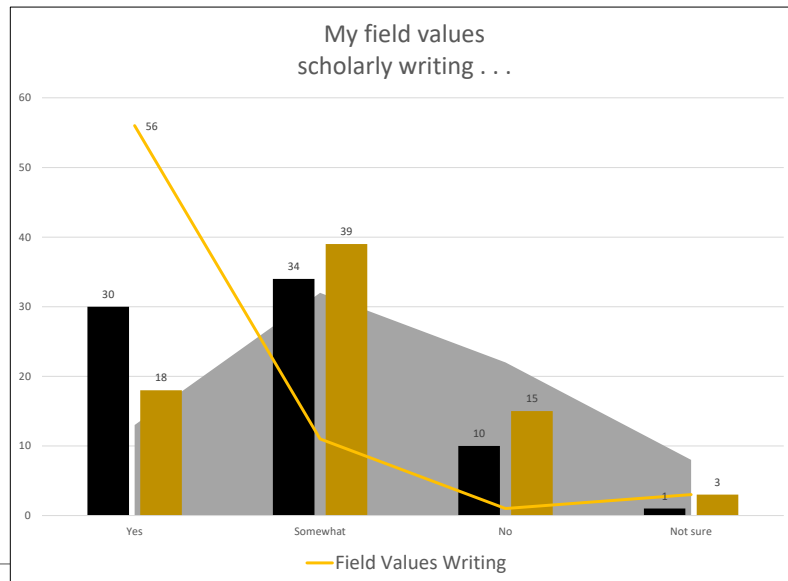


This concern about scholars in their field respecting and understanding what they write overlaps with another concern. The columns here are the same as the previous slide. The gray shaded area behind them is responses to the question “My writing abilities accurately reflect my abilities as a researcher.” 32 respondents (44%) think that their writing abilities accurately reflect their abilities as a researcher only **somewhat**. Another 22 respondents (31%), indicated their writing does **NOT** accurately reflect their research abilities.

In other words, these scholars believe their research abilities outstrip their writing abilities and that they therefore cannot communicate their research well—or, in words that others will understand and perhaps respect.

In general, these writers seem to see writing and research as two separate things, and they see themselves as researchers more than writers.

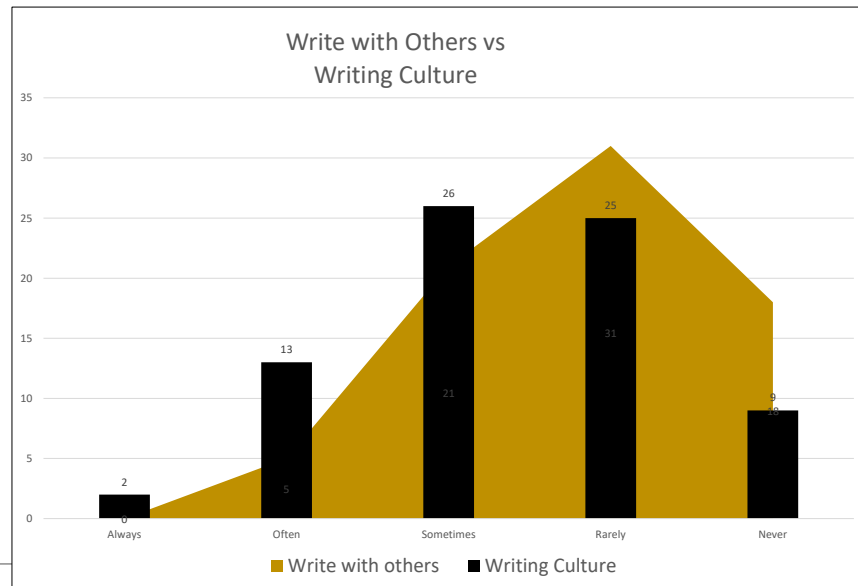
Writing Abilities



Let's add one final piece of data to that same graph. The gold trendline answers the question "I feel that my field values scholarly writing." 56 respondents (79% of them), agreed with this statement. To compare with the rest of the data here, 57 respondents have at least some difficulty putting research into words that will be understood and 64 respondents have difficulty putting research into words that will be respected.

They know the field values writing and writing is one of the primary methods of communicating one's research, but the writers see a disconnect between their writing ability and their research ability and thus worry that they will not communicate in ways that will be respected or understood.

Writing Culture



Now I want to shift our focus to the topic of writing culture.

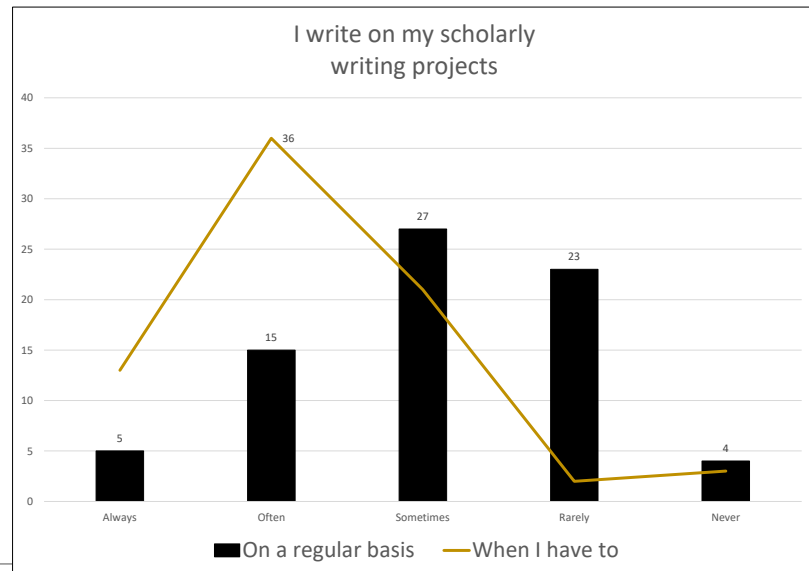
On this graph, the gold area references the question “I write with others, either collaboratively or in a writing group.” 70 respondents selected sometimes, rarely, or never in response to this question, indicating they primarily write alone.

The black bars show results for the question “In my **department**, there is a culture of talking about writing and learning how to improve.” 51 respondents sometimes or rarely experienced this, with a further 9 indicating they never did.

Notice the overlap with the gold area indicating they sometimes, rarely, never write with others collaboratively or in a writing group.

Both questions are referring to what we call a “writing culture,” a community whose members write together, discuss writing, read each other’s work, and so forth. It is therefore unsurprising that respondents who write alone would also lack a departmental outlet for talking about writing.

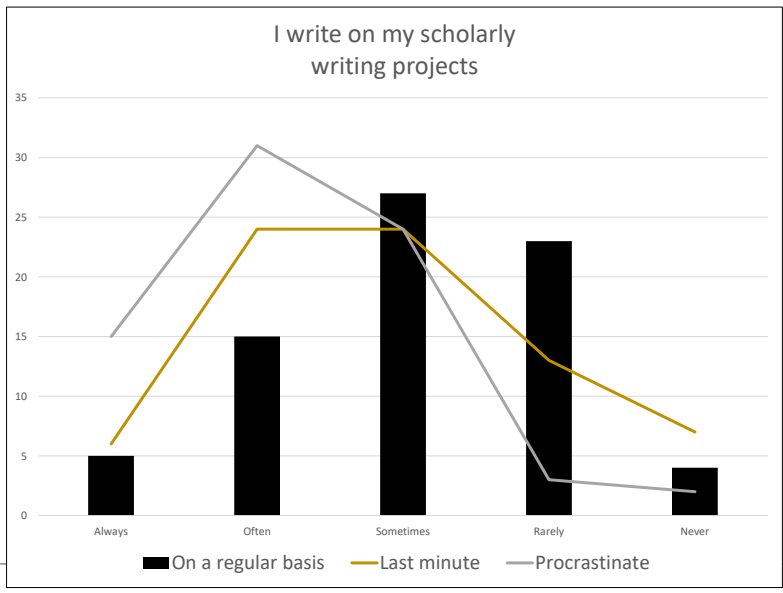
Writing Culture



Another aspect to a writing culture is that it can encourage writing on a regular basis.

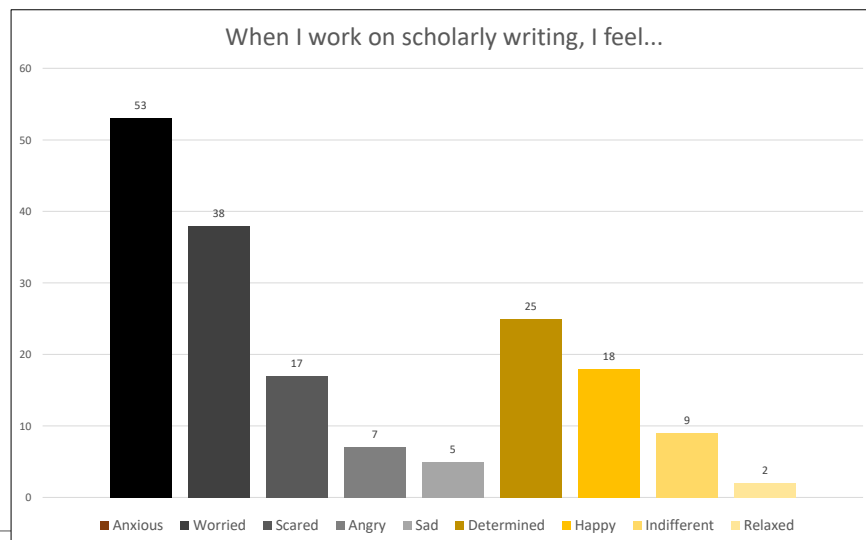
The black bars here show that these writers write **on a regular basis** sometimes (27 writers) and rarely (another 23 writers), for the most part. The gold trendline shows that 70 writers always, often, and sometimes write on scholarly writing projects only when they **have to**, like when an article is due.

Writing Culture



Writing on a regular basis only sometimes or rarely (the same black bars from the previous slide), means that often projects are last minute (gold trend line) and that writers tend to procrastinate (grey trend line).

Writing Emotions

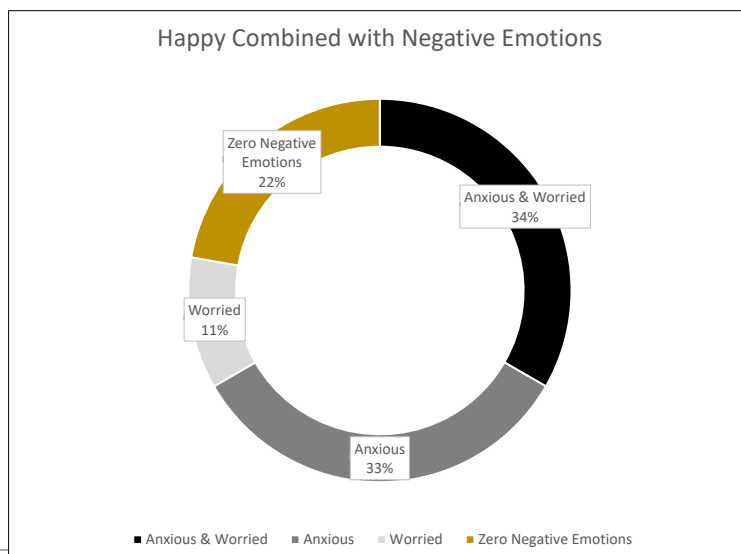


Let's shift now to focusing on emotions related to writing. On the graph, the left set of bars in shades of gray are the negative emotions (anxiety, worry, fear, anger, etc). On the right in shades of gold are the neutral or positive emotions (determined, happy, etc.). Writers were asked to select as many of the emotions as apply when they work on their scholarly writing. 53 respondents (75%) were anxious when they write. Remember Huerta et. al's research on anxiety leading to lower quality and decreased amount of writing.

38 respondents (54%) were worried. 25 (35%) were determined. Along with anxiety, those are the top 3 answers respondents selected for how they felt when writing: anxious, worried, determined.

In contrast, happy was selected by only 18 respondents (25%) and relaxed by only 2 respondents (3%).

Writing Emotions



One further important aspect of the writing emotions data we should consider.

Of the people who selected happy as one option (18 respondents), the majority also selected one or more negative emotions. 34% of those who were happy while writing were also anxious **and** worried (the black portion of the graph), 33% were also anxious (the dark gray), 11% were also worried (the light gray), and only 22% of those who were happy while writing were happy without any negative emotions at all (the gold portion of the graph).

That's 4 people out of a group of 71 respondents.

Program Evaluation

Things I accomplished during IWE

- An outline plus . . .
- 12 pages of text
- Wrote over 3,000 words
- Incorporated Ch. 2 feedback
- Edited 12 pages completely



Before we think about the implications of this data, I want to shift just briefly to looking at data from our post-program evaluations.

Program evaluations mesh well with the data that came out of the survey. The program attendees, despite not always thinking of themselves as writers, were indeed writing and doing the things that writers do. For example, they completed outlines, wrote 12 pages of text or over 3,000 words, incorporated feedback as they revised, and edited 12 pages completely.

While they may not think of themselves as writers, they are. Perhaps they just need to be made aware of that.

Program Evaluation—Writing Abilities

- The number one most useful thing . . . was reverse outlining. I will **literally use this in every paper** I write moving forward!
- The topic sentences lessons were MIND BLOWING. I **look at my writing in a completely different way now**, and for the better.
- It helped me **grow as a writer** and have a different mindset about the scholarly writing process.

We also saw responses that mentioned changes in writing abilities as a result of the IWE program. Writers learned strategies and information that they identified as helping them grow as a writer and as being useful for all future writing projects. **[pause]**

Program Evaluation—Writing Culture

- We developed a sense of **camaraderie**.
- Checking with my small group helped with **accountability**.
- It was really helpful to see **others self-efficacy improve in real time**.
- Writing has always seemed like an individual activity, but I **learned a lot just by trying to communicate the issues** I'm facing and getting feedback on my goals and approaches to writing.



Participants commented on the helpfulness of the writing culture formed during IWE, of being part of a community of writers who could talk about writing and how to improve. They identified the social interaction around writing as being beneficial for accountability as well as learning. [pause]

Program Evaluation—Writing Emotions

- They turned a tough topic into **something very manageable**.
- If I would have known a bit about some of these techniques/mindsets when I was starting my drafting process, I **would have been less intimidated**.
- A good amount of the time was spent on talking about how we felt about writing and **building confidence** around it.

With respect to emotions about writing, participants indicated a shift toward more positive attitudes about writing, finding it more manageable and less intimidating after IWE and mentioning increased confidence. [pause]

A Typical Survey Respondent

- Possessed varied abilities
- Lacked a writing culture
- Experienced negative emotions when writing



Okay. That was a lot of data to throw at you, so let me provide a quick portrait of a typical survey respondent:

Besides being an international student in a STEM field who was drafting a dissertation, our typical survey respondent also varied in their confidence about their writing abilities, from being very confident citing sources to somewhat confident with sentence-level aspects of writing, to less confident at the document level.

They were concerned about being respected and understood by scholars in their field and saw themselves as a better researcher than writer.

They wrote alone and only when they had to and were in a department that seldom talks about writing.

They were anxious and possibly worried when writing.

In addition, they found IWE useful for mitigating some of their concerns.

Implications

- For writers
 - Craft of writing + Culture of writing → Productivity
- For campus/faculty
 - Writing culture at the macro level vs the micro level
- For institutional stakeholders
 - Ability/emotions → Productivity → Degree completion



I began this talk by asking you to consider how we assess and advocate for graduate student needs in ways that secure buy-in from institutional stakeholders whose primary metric is time-to-degree-completion. Similar to the literature I referenced earlier, the data we've looked at places productivity (an important piece of the time-to-completion metric) at the intersection of ability and emotion. The writers I surveyed felt they lacked writing ability and also described a lonely, negative experience of writing.

Since both ability and social interactions affect productivity, we can ignore neither the craft of writing nor the culture of writing if our aim is to improve productivity and thereby improve time-to-completion. Writing support needs to incorporate both the craft of writing (e.g., workshops on time and project management or how to structure a literature review) and also social aspects of writing that are found in writing cultures (e.g., discussions of process, shared writing space, etc). A program like our IWE helps writers' productivity because it addresses both writing ability and writing emotion; in essence, it immerses writers in a short-term writing culture.

Unfortunately, as our survey respondents indicated, many writers lack a writing culture within their department. The question we might ask ourselves is how do we provide programming that is itself a writing culture, but that also develops a writing culture among attendees that carries over beyond the program itself? In other words, how do we encourage the development of a writing culture across campus?

We all do a lot of micro-level work with individual students or individual units on campus, but there is no way we can be the primary writing support for all students all the time. In our programming, we might consider whether there is a way to expand the work we do to the macro level—to support the development of a writing culture across campus as a whole. We end our IWE, for instance, with invitations for participants to take what they have learned and carry it forward when they leave IWE—share the material with friends, start a writing group, conduct their own mini-IWE with labmates, etc. We currently have no way to follow-up on whether or not they do so.

I also find myself wondering how many faculty at my university might say of themselves, “I’m not a writer” or admit to fearing their words won’t be respected or understood by other scholars. If faculty have never experienced a writing culture for themselves, can we expect them to suddenly develop one among their graduate students? Supporting the development of a writing culture across campus would necessarily involve work with faculty as well as students.

One final important question is this: how do we convince institutional stakeholders to expand the time-to-completion conversation to incorporate what we know about the role of confidence, emotions, self-efficacy in a writer’s productivity?

When we have writers who say they are not writers, expressing lack of confidence and excusing progress, intervening might look like first identifying the roots of the lack of confidence or the negative emotions for the writers in our particular context. We may want to start with the sort of questions with which I began this research project:

- How do graduate writers understand **themselves** as writers?
- What experiences have they had with a writing culture?
- And how do they feel when writing?

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Questions?

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That wraps things up for us today. I'll open it up for questions now.